NEW WORLDS 8

SPHERE

EDITED BY HILARY BAILEY

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NEW WORLDS 8

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INTRODUCTION

It is rare for us to find, for one issue, a collection of stories so good, so satisfying and so different from each other as these. The authors, not constricted by having to write predictable stories for a market demanding the same, and then the same again, are able to use all their ability and all their perceptions about the world to convey a sense of life and variety. M. John Harrison's brilliantly written 'Running Down' must surely rank as one of the finest pieces of recent science fiction prose. Barry Bayley's 'The Bees of Knowledge' shows once again his distinctive talent and originality of vision. 'Building Blocks', by a new writer, Peter Jobling, is another very solid, uniquely conceived story, and we have the second in the colourful 'Tales of the Dancers at the End of Time' sequence by Michael Moorcock. It is a great pleasure, too, to include two gifted stories by Nigel Francis, the first he has published, and two by Robert Meadley, which well maintain the promise of his earlier work in NWQ.

We also include a collection of work by the late Mal Dean, who did so many illustrations for *New Worlds*. There is an appreciation of him by Michael Moorcock, who worked closely with him, and poems by his wife, Libby Houston. Mal is greatly missed by those who knew his work and those who knew him as a friend.

Hilary Bailey

RUNNING DOWN

M. JOHN HARRISON

I knew Lyall, certainly, and I was in the Great Langdale Valley at the time: but I had no place in the events of that Autumn in the late 70s – no active place, that is; and I could no more have prevented them than the eroded heather of the rhacomitrium-heath can 'prevent' the wind. More important, perhaps, I could not have foreseen, much less averted, Lyall's end. He may have been insane (myself, too) long before the insensate nightmare of Jack's Rake, but that does not explain why the earth shook; he may have murdered the hapless woman who lived with him to further some fantastic metaphysical image he had of himself, but that relates in no way you or I could understand to what I saw on the summit of Pavey Ark in the early hours of a haunted morning, the *ascent* that has remained with me, waking or sleeping ever since.

Lyall was never more than an acquaintance of mine even at Cambridge, where we shared a room and might have been described as 'close'; in fact, there were times when we found it difficult to disguise our dislike for one another. Nevertheless, we clung together, embittered and hurt – neither of us could make any warm contact with our contemporaries. To be honest: no-one else would put up with us, so we put up with each other. It's common enough. Even now, Cambridge is all comfortable November mists, nostalgic ancient quadrangles, the conspiracy of the choir practising at King's – pure, ecstatic, and a constant wound to the outsider. It was inevitable that Lyall and I press those wounds together to achieve some sort of sour blood-fraternity. I suppose that's hard to understand; but it must be a common enough human compulsion.

Lyall was tall and ectomorphic, with a manner already measured, academic, middle-aged. His face was long and equine, its watery eyes, pursed mouth and raw cheeks accusatory, as if he blamed the world outside for his own desperate awkwardness. He did: and affected a callow but remorseless cynicism to cover it. He was a brilliant student, but already comically accident-prone – constantly scratched and bruised, his clothes stained with oil and ink and food. His background (he had been brought up by two impoverished, determined maiden ladies in Bath) chafed the tender flesh of my own early experience under the bleak shadow of the southern end of the Pennines – the open-coffin funerals of a failing industrial town, a savage unemployment, black methodism.

We must have made a strange pair in those endless Winter fogs: Lyall as thin as a stick, hopeless in the tweed jacket and college scarf his aunts insisted he wear, his inflamed nose always running, his wrists and ankles protruding dismally from the awful clothes; and myself, short of leg, barrel chested and heavily muscled about the shoulders and ridiculous long arms for the solitary climbing and fell-walking that had in adolescence become my passionate escape from the back-terraces of the North. In those days, before the Dru accident, I could do a hundred press-ups with a fifty-pound pack on my back. I was sullen, dark, aggressive, and so terrified of being nicknamed 'Ape' by the fragile, intellectual young women of the modern languages faculty that no-one but Lyall ever had the miserable chance. God knows why we do these things to ourselves.

So: it was a temporary alliance. I have memories of Lyall's high, complaining voice, his ruthless wit and feral disappointment as we separated on the last day of the last term. He took a poor Honours, due to an unfortunate bicycle accident a week before Finals: but mine was poorer (although somewhat ameliorated by the offer of a junior instructorship I'd received from an Outward Bound school in Kenya). His handclasp was curt, mine cursory. We were both faintly relieved, I think.

We never sought each other out. I believe he tried several jobs in the provinces before becoming the junior personnel officer of a small manufacturing firm in London, which was

where I met him again, quite by chance, some two or three years later.

A week off the boat from North Africa – and finding it almost as difficult to adjust to the dirty chill of late Autumn in the city as to accept bacon at a hundred pence a pound after Kenya's steak at twenty-five the kilo – I was wandering rather morosely about in the West End, wondering grimly if I could afford to go into a cinema and waste another evening, when I spotted him teetering at a kerb trying to hail a taxi. Two ignored him while I watched. He hadn't changed much: his ghastly college scarf was now tucked into the neck of a thin raincoat, and he was carrying one of those wretched little plastic 'executive' cases. The contemptuous grooves round his mouth had deepened.

'Oh, hallo Egerton,' he said off-handedly, staring away from me down the road. He looked drunk. One of his hands was inexpertly bandaged with a great wad of dirty white gauze. He fiddled with his case. 'Why on earth did *you* come back to this rat-hole? I'd have thought you were better off out of it.'

I felt like a deserter returning to some doomed ship only to find its captain still alive and brooding alone over the white water and foul ground: but I was surprised to be remembered at all, and, when he finally captured his taxi, I agreed to go home with him.

It turned out that he'd been in another taxi when it became involved in some minor fracas with a pedestrian, and he had to get out. 'I should have been home bloody hours ago,' he said sourly. That was all: and by the time we reached his flat I was beginning to regret an impulse which had basically been one of sympathy. There was an argument with the driver, too, over a malfunctioning meter. It was always like that with Lyall. But Holloway isn't Cambridge.

He had two poky, unwelcoming rooms at the top of a large furnished house. The place had a sink, a filthy gas-stove and some carpets glazed with ancient grease: it was littered with dirty crocks, empty milk bottles, every kind of rubbish conceivable; everything in it seemed to be damaged and old; it was indescribably cheerless.

When I declined the offer of a can of soup (partly because he was at pains to let me see he had nothing else in the cupboard where he kept his food, and partly out of horror at that mephitic stove) he shrugged ungraciously, sat cross-legged on the floor among the old newspapers and political

pamphets – he seemed to have become interested in some popular nationalist organisation, to the extent anyway of scrawling 'Rubbish!' or 'A reasonable assumption' in the margins of some of the stuff – and ate it ravenously straight out of the pan. He was preoccupied by some slight he'd received at work. 'Bloody jumped up filing clerks,' he explained, 'every one of them. You'd better sit on the bed, Egerton. There's nothing else, so you needn't bother to look for it.'

Later, he insisted on going out to an off-licence and fetching back some half-pint bottles of stout. This produced a parody of fellowship, strung with gaunt silences. We really had nothing in common any more, especially since Lyall would mention Cambridge only in the cryptical, barbed asides of which he was so fond.

But he seemed determined; and I took it as a desperate attempt on his part to achieve some sort of contact, some sort of human feeling among all that cold squalor. His loneliness was apparent – in deference to it, I talked; and I was quite happy to fall in with his mood until I realised that he had adopted a most curious conversational procedure.

This consisted in first eliciting from me some reminiscence of my time in Africa, then blatantly ignoring me as I talked – flicking through the pages of a girlie magazine, picking up books only to toss them aside again, staring out of the uncurtained windows at the ominous pall of sodium light outside; even whistling or humming. He took to breaking in on my anecdotes to say, apropos of nothing, 'I really ought to have that scarf cleaned,' or, 'What's that racket in the street? Damned lunatics;' and then when (perfectly relieved to escape from what had become an agonising monologue) I made some answering remark about the London air or traffic, demanding:

'What? Oh, go on, go on, you mustn't pay me any attention.'

I talked desperately. I found myself becoming more and more determined to overcome his scarcely-veiled sneers and capture his attention, inventing at one point an adventure on Mount Nyiru that I simply hadn't had – although it did happen to a fellow instructor of mine shortly after his arrival at the school.

It was an eerie experience. What satisfaction he could have had from it, I can't imagine.

'Fairly pleased with yourself then, are you?' he said sud-

denly. He went on to repeat it to himself, rocking to and fro. 'Fairly pleased—' And he laughed.

In the end, I got up and made some excuse, a train, a matter of an hotel key: what else could I have done?

He leapt immediately to his feet, the most ludicrous expression of regret on his face. 'Wait, Egerton!' he said. He glanced desperately round the room. 'Look here,' he said, 'you can't go without finishing the last bottle, can you?' I shrugged. 'I'll only chuck it out. I'll just—'He lurched about, kicking up drifts of rubbish. He hadn't taken that flimsy raincoat off all night. 'I can't seem—'

'Let me.' And I took the bottle away from him.

I bought my knife at Frank Davies' in Ambleside, more than twenty years ago. Among its extensible, obsessive gadgets is a thing like a claw, for levering off the caps of bottles. I'd used it a thousand times before that night; more. I latched it on to the cap with my right hand, holding the neck of the bottle with my left. An odd thing happened. The cap resisted; I pulled hard; the bottle broke in my hand, producing a murderous fork of brown glass.

Beer welled up over a deep and painful gash between my thumb and forefinger, pink and frothy. I stared at it. 'Christ.'

But if the accident was odd, Lyall's reaction was odder.

He groaned. Then he began to laugh. I sucked at the wound, staring helplessly at him over my hand. He turned away, fell on his knees in front of his bed and beat his hands on it. 'Bugger off, Egerton!' he croaked. His laughter turned suddenly into great heaving sobs. 'Get out of my sight!' I stood looking stupidly down at him for a moment, at the thin shoulders crawling beneath that dirty raincoat, the miserable drift of *Guardians* and girlie magazines and Patriotic Front literature: then turned and stumbled down the stairs like a blind man.

It wasn't until I'd slammed the outside door that the full realisation of what had happened hit me. I sat down for a minute among the dented bins and rotting planks of the concrete area, shivering in what I suppose must have been shock. I remember trying to read what was daubed on the door. Then an upstairs window was flung open, and I could hear him again, half laughing, half sobbing. I got up and went down the street; he leant out of the window and shouted after me.

I was terrified that he might follow me, to some lighted,

crowded tube station, still laughing and shouting. He'd been expecting that accident all evening; he'd been waiting all evening for it.

For a couple of weeks after that, a thin, surly ghost, he haunted me through the city. I kept imagining him on escalators, staring bitterly through the dirty glass at the breasts of the girls trapped in the advertisement cases; a question mark made of cynical and lonely ectoplasm.

Why he chose to live in squalor; why he had shouted 'You aren't the first, Egerton, and you won't be the bloody last!' as I fled past the broken milk machines and dreary frontages of his street; how he – or anyone – could have predicted the incident of the last bottle: all questions I never expected to have answered, since I intended to avoid him like the plague if I ever caught sight of him again. I had four stitches put in my hand.

Then the Chamonix climbing school post I had been waiting for came free, and I forgot him in the subsequent rush of preparation.

He stayed forgotten during a decade which ended for me – along with a lot of other things – on a stiffish overhang some way up the Dru, in a wind I can still feel on sleepless nights, like a razor at the bone.

When I left Chamonix I could still walk (many can't after the amputation of a great toe), but I left counting only losses. The English were just then becoming unpopular on the Continent – but I returned to Britain more out of the lairing instinct of a hurt animal than as a response to some fairly good-humoured jostling outside Snell's sports shop. I simply couldn't stand to be in the same country as the Alps.

At home, I took a job in the English department of a crowded comprehensive school in Wandsworth; hobbled round classrooms for a year or so, no more bored than the children who had to sit day after day in front of me; while on Saturday mornings I received, at the Hampstead hospital, treatment for the lingering effect of the frost-bite on my fingers and remaining toes.

I found quickly that walking returned to me something of what I'd lost to a bit of frayed webbing and a twelve hour Alpine night. During the long vacations that are the sole reward of the indifferent teacher, I rediscovered the Pennines, the Grampians, Snowdonia – and found that while

Capel Curig and Sergeant Man are no substitute for the Aiguille Verte group, I could at least recapture something of what I'd felt there in Cambridge days and before. I walked alone, despite the lesson of the Dru (which I am still paying for in a more literal way: French mountain rescue is efficient, but it can cost you twenty years of whatever sort of life you have left to you; up there, many people pray *not* to be taken off the mountain); and I discouraged that obsessive desire to converse which seems to afflict hikers.

It was on one of these holidays that I heard next from Lyall.

I was staying in the 'Three Peaks' district north and west of Settle, and beginning to find its long impressionistic sweeps of moorland arduous and unrewarding. Lyall's letter caught up with me after a day spent stumping half-heartedly over Scales Moor in the kind of morose warm drizzle only Yorkshire can produce. I was sufficiently browned-off on returning, I recall, to assassinate a perfectly good pair of boots by leaving them too long on top of Mrs Bailey's ravenous kitchen stove.

So the surge of sentiment which took hold of me when I recognised Lyall's miserly handwriting may be put down to this: I was soaked to the skin, and receptive.

The letter had been forwarded from Chamonix (which led me to wonder if he'd been as drunk as he seemed on the night of the accident – or as indifferent), and again from my digs in Wandsworth; a round trip of absurd length for something which bore a Westmorland postmark. That in itself was curious; but it was the contents that kept me some time from my shepherd's pie.

It seemed that Lyall's maiden ladies had finally succumbed, within two months of one another and despite all that Bath could do, to the inroads of heart-disease; leaving him – 'Almost as an afterthought,' as he described it, 'among two reams of sound advice – ' a property in the Langdale Valley. He had nothing good to say of the place, but was 'hard up' and couldn't afford to sell it. He had 'funked' his personnel officership in London because the place had begun to 'stink of appeasement' – an apparently political comment I couldn't unravel, although by now, like all of us, I knew a little more about the aims of the Patriotic Front.

He had married: this I found almost incredible.

He suggested with a sort of contemptuous bonhomie that if I was 'tired of grubbing about on the Continental muck-heap', I might do an old friend the favour of dropping by to see him.

There was something else there; he was his usual mixture of cold formality and old colloquialisms; 'It's not much to ask' and 'Please yourself of course' were there; but underneath it all I sensed again the desperation I had witnessed in that squalid flat twelve or thirteen years before – a horrified sense of his own condition, like a sick man with a mirror. And his last sentence was in the form of an admission he had, I'm quite sure, never in his life made before:

'Since you seem to like that sort of mucking about,' he finished, 'I thought we might walk up some of those precious hills of yours together. It's what I need to cheer me up.'

That, tempered no doubt by a twin curiosity as to the nature of his inheritance and the temperament of his unnamed wife, decided me. I packed my rucksack that night, and in the morning left Mrs Bailey's inestimable boarding house to its long contemplation of Ingleborough Common. Why I was so quick to respond to him, I don't know; and if I'd suspected one half of the events that were to follow my decision, I would have been content with any amount of rain, moss and moorland.

Ingleborough Hill itself is a snare and a delusion, since a full third of its imposing height is attained by way of an endless gentle slope bare of interest and a punishment to the ankles: but that morning it thrust up into the weather like a warning – three hundred million years of geological time lost without trace in the unconformity between its base and its flat summit, from which the spectre of the brigand Celt chuckles down at that of his bemused, drenched Roman foe.

The Ambleside bus was empty but for a few peaky, pinch-faced children in darned pullovers and cracked shoes. Their eyes were large and austere and dignified, but for all that they taunted the driver unmercifully until they spilled out to ravage the self-involved streets of Kendal, leaving him to remark, 'It don't bother the kids, though, does it?' It didn't seem to bother him much, either. He was a city man,

he went on to explain, and you had to admit that things were easier out here.

In the score or so of miles that separate Ingleton from Ambleside, geomorphology takes hold of the landscape and gives it a cruel wrench; and the moorland – where a five-hour walk may mean, if you are lucky, a vertical gain of a few hundred feet – gives way to a mass of threatening peaks among which for his effort a man may rise two thousand feet in half a mile of forward travel. If I saw the crowding, the steepness, of those hills as Alpine, it may be that the memory dulls in proportion to the wound's ripening, no more.

The weather, too, is prone to startling mutation in that journey between Yorkshire and Westmorland, and I found the Langdales stuporous under a heat wave of a week's standing (it works, as often as not, the other way round). Ambleside was lifeless. Being too early for the valley bus, and tiring finally of Frank Davies' display window, I decided to walk to Lyall's 'property'.

Heat vibrated from the greenstone walls of the new cottages at Skelwith Bridge, and the Force was muted. A peculiar diffused light hung over the fellsides, browning the haunted fern; Elterwater and Chapel were quiet, deserted; the sky was like brass. I had some conversation with a hard-eyed pony in the paddock by the Co-op forecourt when I stopped to drink a can of mineral water; but none with the proprietor, who was languid even among the cool of his breakfast cereals and string.

Outside Chapel I took to the shade of the trees and discovered a dead hare, the flies quite silent and enervated as they crawled over its face; a little further on, in the dark well of shadow at the base of the drystone, a motionless adder, eyeless and dried up. The valley had undergone some deterioration in the fifteen years since I had last seen it: shortly after I got my first sight of the Bowfell crags and Mickleden (the Rosset Gill path a trembling vertical scar in the haze), I came upon the rusting corpse of a motor car that had run off the difficult narrow road and into the beck.

Here and there, drystone scattered in similar incidents simply lay in the pasture, white clumps infested by nettles, like heaps of skulls; and when I came finally to the address Lyall had given me, I found the fellside below Raw Pike blackened up to the five hundred foot line by fire. I didn't know then what I began to suspect later; I saw it all in terms

of the children on the Ambleside bus, the price of bacon in Wandsworth – symptomatic of another kind of disorder.

And none of it prepared me for Lyall's 'property', a low shambling affair of local stone, facing directly on to the road; the main cottage having two rooms on each floor, and a couple of ancillary buildings leaning up against it as if they would prefer not to but had no choice.

It was amazingly dilapidated. Much of the glass at the front had been replaced by inaccurately-cut oblongs of hardboard; something seemed to have been spilt out of one of the upper windows to dry as an unpleasant brown smear on the stone. The barn roofs sagged, and wanted slates; uncovered rafters are an agony and here crude patches of corrugated iron did little to mitigate it. One corner of the cottage had been battered repeatedly by confused motorists returning at night from the pubs of Ambleside to the National Trust camp site at the head of the valley; the same fire that had wasted the fern on the slope above had charred it; small stones and mortar made a litter of the road.

I untied the binder twine that fastened the gate and wandered round, knocking shyly on doors and calling out. The valley, bludgeoned into stillness by the sun, gave back lethargic echoes.

Road-walking tires my mutilated foot quite quickly. I keep a stick clipped to my pack where an ice axe would normally go, and try to have as little recourse to it as possible: the first two miles had forced it on me that day. I knocked down a few nettles with it, watched the sap evaporate. Two or three minute figures were working their way slowly down the Band, heat and light resonating ecstatically from the 2900-foot contour behind them. I sat on an upturned water trough, blinking, and cursing Lyall for his absence.

I'd been there for perhaps a quarter of an hour, wondering if I could hear the valley bus, when he came out of the house, swirling dirty water round an enamel bowl.

'Good God!' he exclaimed sarcastically, and the stuff in the bowl slopped down the front of his trousers. 'The famous Alpinist deigns to visit.' He shot the water carelessly into the nettles. 'Why the hell didn't you knock, Egerton? Shy?' I had the impression that he'd been watching me ever since I arrived. It wouldn't have been beyond him.

'You'd better come in,' he said, staring off into the distance, 'now you're here.'

The intervening years had made him a parody of himself – lined and raw, all bone and raging, unconscious self-concern; he'd developed a stoop, a 'dowager's hump', during his London days; a small burn on his neck seemed to be giving him trouble, and he kept his head at a constant slight angle to ease the inflammation caused by his collar. He remembered I was there, nodded at my stick. An old cruelty heliographed out like the light from the peaks.

'You're fine mountaineering cronies won't be so interested in you now, then? Not that I'd have thought that thing stopped you buying their beer.'

It may have been true. I honestly hadn't thought of it until then. 'I've learnt to live with it,' I said, as lightly as I could.

He paused in the doorway – Lyall always walked ahead – and looked me up and down. 'You don't know the half of it, Egerton,' he said. 'You never will.' Then, sharply: 'Are you coming in, or not?' The crags of Bowfell broadcast their heat across Mickleden, and the Pikes gave it back like a thin, high song of triumph.

What the outer dilapidation of the cottage led me to expect, I don't know: but it was nothing to what I found inside; and despite all that has happened since it still unnerves me to think of that place.

Plaster had fallen from the ceiling of the grim cubby-hole of a kitchen, and still lay on the cracked tile floor; an atrocious wallpaper meant to represent blond Swedish panelling, put up by the maiden ladies or one of their tenants in an attempt to modernise, bellied slackly off the walls. In the living room there was only plaster, and one wall had actually fissured enough to admit a thin, wandering line of sunlight – just as well, since the windows let in very little. Across this tenuous wafer of illumination, motes danced madly; and the place stank.

All the furniture was scarred and loose-jointed. Everywhere, objects: table-lamps, ashtrays and paltry little ornaments of greenstone: and nothing whole. Everything he owned had become grubby and tired and used in a way that only time uses things, so that it looked as if it had been broken thirty years before: a litter of last month's paper-backed thrillers, spilling with broken spines and dull covers and an atmosphere of the second-hand shop from the book-

cases; gramophone records underfoot, scratched and warped and covered in bits of dried food from the dinnerplates, with their remains of week-old meals, scattered over the carpet.

It was as if some new shift of his personality, some radical escalation of his *morgue* and his bitterness, had coated everything about him with a grease of hopelessness and age. I was appalled; and he must have sensed it, because he grinned savagely and said:

'Don't twitch your nose like that, Egerton. Sit down, if you can find something that won't offend your lilywhite bum.' But he must have regretted it almost immediately – making tea with an air of apology that was the nearest he ever came to the real thing, he admitted, 'I don't know what I'm doing in this hole. I don't seem to be any better off than I was.' He had got a job correcting publishers' proofs, but it gave him nothing, 'Not even much of a living.' While I drank my tea, he stared at the floor.

I got nothing but the weather from him for about half an hour. Then he said suddenly: 'I haven't seen – what was his name? – *Oxlade* – lately. You remember him. The guitarist.'

I was astonished. Probably the last time either of us had seen Oxlade was at Cambridge, just before he went down in the middle of his second year to sing with some sort of band; and then Lyall had loathed the man even more than the music, if that were possible.

I chuckled embarrassedly. All I could think of to say was, 'No. I suppose not.' This threw him into a temper.

'Christ, Egerton,' he complained, 'I'm doing my bit. You might join in. We've got little enough in common—'

'I'm sorry,' I began, 'I—'

'You've brought some bloody funny habits home with you, I must say.' He was silent again for a moment, hunched forward in his seat looking at something between his feet. He raised his eyes and said quietly: 'We're stuck with each other, Egerton. You need me again now. That's why you came crawling back here.' This with a dreadful flatness of tone.

I looked for my rucksack. 'There's a place where I can camp further up the valley,' I told him stiffly; perhaps because I suspected he was correct.

We were both on our feet when a large vehicle drew up in the road outside, darkening the room further and filling

it with a smell of dust and diesel oil; airbrakes hissed. It was the valley bus, and down from it stepped Lyall's wife. Lyall, tensed in the gloom, seemed to shrug a little – we both welcomed the interruption. 'Look, Egerton—' he said.

He went to let her in.

She was a tall, haggard woman, ten or even fifteen years older than him and wearing a headscarf tied in a strangely dated fashion. Her legs were swollen, and one of them was bandaged below the knee. From under the headscarf escaped thin wisps of brownish hair, framing a quiet, passive face. She was carrying two huge shopping bags. They greeted one another disinterestedly; she nodded briefly at me, her lips a thin line, and went immediately into the kitchen, swaying a little as if suffering from the heat.

'You didn't tell me we'd run out of coffee,' she called. When she returned, it was to throw a couple of paperbacks on the floor in front of him. 'There weren't any papers,' she said. 'Only the local one.' She went upstairs, and I didn't see her again that day. Lyall hadn't introduced her, and I don't think he ever told me her name.

I didn't want to stay, but he insisted. 'Forget all that,' he said. Later, he opened some cans into a saucepan. While we ate, I stuck to Cambridge, the safe topic, and was glad to see his customary sense of the ridiculous steadily replacing the earnestness with which he'd introduced the subject of Oxlade. Afterwards, 'Let me do the washing up,' I offered; and so cleared enough floor space to unroll my sleeping bag. Nobody had unpacked the shopping; I couldn't coax more than a trickle from the kitchen taps. Lyall looked cynically on.

After he'd gone to bed, I heard them arguing in tight suppressed voices. The sound carried all over the house – hypnotic but meaningless. The darkness was stuffy and electrical, and I hadn't got rid of the smell.

They were up and sparring covertly over some domestic lapse before I got out of my sleeping bag the following morning – the woman throwing things round the sink, Lyall prowling restlessly out into the garden and back again. If my presence had acted as a brake the night before, it was clearly losing its effect; by the time breakfast was ready, they were nagging openly at one another over the eggs. I would have been more embarrassed if the argument had not

been over who was to unpack yesterday's shopping.

'I emptied the bloody Elsan yesterday,' said Lyall defensively. 'You do the shopping, not me.'

'For God's sake who eats it?'

I drank some reconstituted orange juice and bent my head over my plate. The woman laughed a bit wildly and retreated into the kitchen. ' "For God's sake who *eats* it?" ' mimicked Lyall, ignoring me. I heard her scraping something into the sink tidy. There was a sudden sharp intake of breath. A moment later she reappeared, holding up her left hand. Blood was trickling slowly down the wrist.

'I'm sorry,' she said desperately. 'I cut it on a tin-lid. I couldn't help it.'

'Oh, *Christ*!' shouted Lyall. He smashed his fist down on the table, jumped to his feet and stalked out.

She looked bemusedly after him. 'Where are you going?' she called.

The cut was a ragged lip running across the base of her thumb, shallow but unpleasant. Worried by the grey tinge to her sallow, ageing face, I made her sit down while I rummaged through the place looking for some sort of dressing. In the end I had to raid my pack for a bit of plaster. When I got back to her she was slumped head-down on the table, her thin bony shoulders trembling. I saw to her hand, wishing Lyall would come back. While I was doing it, she said:

'You wonder why I stay here, don't you?'

The palm of her hand was cross-hatched with other, older scars. I might have been tempted to chuckle at the thought of these two sour accident-prones, trapped together in their crumbling backwater and taking miserable revenges on one another, if I hadn't had recollections of my own – chilly images of London in late Autumn, the pall of sodium light outside Lyall's poky rooms, the last bottle of beer.

'Lyall's hard to live with,' I temporised. I didn't want her confidences, any more than I wanted his. 'At Cambridge—'

She took hold of my wrist and squeezed it with a queer fervour. 'It's because he needs someone.' I shrugged. She hung on. 'I love him, you know,' she said challengingly. I tried to free my wrist. 'So do you,' she pressed. 'You could be anywhere but here, but you're his best friend—'

'Look,' I said angrily, 'you're making this very difficult. Do you want your hand bandaged or not?' And when she simply stared: 'Lyall just invited me to stay here. We knew

each other at Cambridge, that's all. Hasn't he told you that?'

She shook her head. 'No.' Colour had come back into her face. 'He needs help. I made him write to you. He thinks—' Her mouth thinned; she seemed to withdraw. 'Let him tell you himself.' She looked down at her hand. 'Thank you,' she said formally.

I spent the rest of the day sitting on the water trough, staring out across the valley at quite another range of hills and wondering who I'd meet if I went to one of the hotels for a drink. At about mid-day she came out of the house, squinting into the sunlight.

'I'm sorry about this morning,' she said. I muttered something, and drew her attention to a hawk of some kind hanging in the updraught over Raw Pike. She glanced at it impatiently. 'I don't know anything about birds. I was in social work.' She made a vague motion that took in the whole valley, the hot inverted bowl of the sky. 'Sometimes I blame this place, but it isn't that.' She had come out to say something else, but I gave her no encouragement. Perhaps I should have done. 'Do you want any lunch?' she said.

Lyall returned with the valley bus.

'I suppose she's been talking to you,' he said. He avoided my eyes. A little bit disgusted by the whole thing, I walked up to the New Dungeon Ghyll and spent the evening drinking beer. The place was full of tourists who'd been running up and down Mill Gill all day in tennis shoes, making the rest of us look like old men. When I got back, Lyall and his wife were in bed, the eternal dull complaint rising and falling soporifically through the cottage. I was half asleep when the woman suddenly shouted:

'I'm twenty-five years old! *Twenty-five years!* What's happening? What's happened to me?'

After that, I got up and paced around until dawn, thinking.

Heat pumped down the valley from the secret fastnesses of Flat Crags, from the dry fall at Hell Ghyll; up in the high gullies, the rock sang with it. Further down, the hanging Langdale oakwoods were sapless, submissive – heat had them by the throat. A sense of imminence filled the unlovely living room of the Lyall cottage, reeked on the stairs, fingered out from the bedroom like ectoplasm from a medium. Lyall took to staring for hours at the crack in the wall, hands clasped between his knees. His wife was quiet and

tense. Her despairing cry in the dark still hung between them.

Into this strange stasis or prostration, like a low, insistent voice, a thousand small accidents introduced themselves: the insect bite, the hand slipping on the can-opener, a loss of balance on the stair – cuts, rashes, saucepans dropped, items lost or broken; a constant, ludicrous, nerve wracking communication from the realm of random incidence. For half a day the kitchen taps refused to give water of any sort, then leaked a slow, rusty liquor even when turned off; four slates fell from the roof in an afternoon of motionless air; Lyall's wife suddenly became allergic to the sun, and walked about disfigured.

Lyall's response to these events was divided equally between irritation and apathy. He brooded. Several times he took me aside as if to broach some mutually embarrassing subject, and on each occasion failed. I couldn't help him: the raging contempt of his Cambridge days, applied with as much rigour to his own motives as to those of others, was by now a memory. Out in one of the barns, cutting a piece of zinc to mend the roof, he said, 'Don't you ever regret your childhood, Egerton?'

I didn't think I did; I didn't think childhood meant much after a certain age. I had to shout this over the screech of the hacksaw. He watched my lips for a while, like a botanist with an interesting but fairly common specimen, then stopped working.

'In Bath, you know,' he said, brushing his lank hair off his face, 'It was all so clear-cut. A sort of model of the future, with neat sharp edges: English, Classics, Cambridge; and after that, God knows what – the Foreign Service, if the old dears had a thought in their heads.' He laughed bitterly. 'I had to play the piano.' He held up the hand with the dirty ball of bandage on the thumb. 'With this.' He looked disgusted for a moment, but when he turned away, his eyes were watering.

'I was really rather good at it.'

This picture of the young Lyall, shut in some faded Regency drawing-room with a piano (his limbs protruding amazed and raw from the tubular worsted shorts and red blazer his maiden ladies would doubtless have insisted upon), was ludicrous enough. He compounded it by yearning, 'We never deserve the future, Egerton. They never tell us what it's going to be like.'

When I tried to laugh him out of it, he went angrily off

with, 'You might show a bit of interest in someone else's problems. It'd take your mind off your precious bloody foot.'

He came back to the house late, with a half-empty bottle of brandy. God knows what fells he had been staggering across, red-faced and watery-eyed, his shirt pulled open to the waist. His wife and I had been listening to Bach: when he entered the room, she glanced at me and went straight upstairs. Lyall cocked his head, laughed, kicked out at the radiogram. 'All that bloody Lovelace we had, eh?' he said, making some equation I couldn't follow.

'I don't know what I am, Egerton,' he went on, pulling a chair up close to mine. 'You don't, either. We'll never know the half of it,' he said companionably. 'Eh?' He was bent on baring his soul (or so I imagined): yearning for the emotional storm I was equally determined to avoid – Cambridge, recrimination, the maudlin reaffirmation of our interdependence. 'Have a bloody drink, Egerton,' he demanded.

'I think you ought to have some coffee,' I said. 'I'll make you some.' I went into the kitchen.

'You bloody prig,' he said quietly.

When I went back, he had gone upstairs. I listened for a moment, but could hear nothing. In the end I drank the coffee myself and went to bed. That night was one of vast heat and discomfort: the rancid smell I had noticed on my first day in the cottage oozed from the furniture as if the heat were rendering from the stuffing of the cushions some foul grease no scrubbing brush could touch; my sleeping bag was sticky and intolerable, and no amount of force would move the windows; I lay for hours in an exhausted doze poisoned by nightmares and incoherent, half-conscious fantasies.

Groaning from upstairs disturbed that dreary reverie. A sleepy moan, the dull thump of feet on the bedroom floor; something fell over. There was a moment of perfect silence, then Lyall saying loudly, 'Oh Christ, I'm *sorry* then.' Somebody came stumbling down through the thick, stale darkness of the staircase. My watch had stopped.

'Egerton?' called Lyall, bumping about in the dark. 'Egerton? Egerton?'

He sounded like a dead child discovering that eternity is some buzzing, languorous dream of Bath. I heard him cough once or twice into the sink; then the brandy bottle gurgled, fell on to the kitchen tiles and was smashed. 'Oh God,'

whispered Lyall. 'Do you ever have nightmares, Egerton? Real ones, where you might just as well be awake?' I felt him coming closer through that ancient velvet darkness. 'All this is my fault, you know.' He swallowed loudly. He tried to touch my shoulder.

'You could get another job,' I suggested cautiously, moving away. 'The proof reading doesn't seem to make you much.'

'When we came here, this place was perfect. Now look at it.' There was a pause, as he scratched irritably about for the light switch. He failed to find it. 'It's a slum, *and I'm doing it*. What difference can a job make?'

'Look,' I said, 'I don't quite understand.' I couldn't bear the confines of the sleeping bag any more, but out there in the dark I was as lost as Lyall. I perched on what I hoped was the arm of a chair. 'You'd better tell me about it,' I invited, since there seemed to be no alternative; and added, feeling disgusted with myself even as I did it, 'Old chap.' I needn't have worried. He hardly noticed.

'Everything I touch falls to pieces,' he said. 'It's been happening since I was a kid.' Then, with a dull attempt at dignity – 'It's held me back, of course: I'd have had a First if it hadn't been for that bloody bicycle; the last job went down the shute with the office duplicator; I can't even get on a bus without it smashing into something.'

'Everybody feels like that at some time or another,' I said. 'In the Alps—'

'Bugger the Alps, Egerton!' he hissed. 'Listen to me for once!'

His mind was a back drain, it was an attic with a trap full of dry, eviscerated mice. In it he'd stored up every incident of his childhood – a nursery *faux pas*, a blocked lavatory bowl, a favourite animal run down in the street – making no distinction between the act and the accident, between the cup and the lip. With a kind of quiet hysteria in his voice, he detailed every anti-climax of his maturity – each imagined slight carefully catalogued, each spillage, each coin lost among the rubbish beneath a basement grid; every single inkblot gathered and sorted into a relentless, unselective system of culpability.

It was nonsensical and terrifying. Typists, tutors and maiden ladies, his victims and pursuers, haunted him through that attic; *I* haunted him, it seemed, for he ended with: 'It was me that cut your hand in London, Egerton,

not the bottle. I couldn't help it. Something flows out of me, and I can't control it any more—

'Look at this place. Look at it!' And he began to sob.

A dim, cobwebby light was filtering through the remaining panes of glass, greying his face, his scrawny, hopeless body. I have a horror of confession; I was angry with him for burdening me, and at the same time full of an awful empty pity; what could I have said to him?— That I thought he was mad? Self concern makes us all mad. All I could do then was pat his shoulder reassuringly.

'Look,' I said, 'it's getting light, Lyall. Let's both have a bit of sleep. We can work it out later. You've obviously got a bit depressed, that's all. You'll feel better now.'

He stiffened. One moment he was blubbering helplessly, the next he had said quite clearly, 'I might have known. You've had it easy all your life, you bloody pompous bastard—'

I got to my feet. I thought of Chamonix, and the razor of wind that shaves the Aiguilles. I should have kept my temper; instead, I simply felt relieved to have a reason for losing it. I waited for a moment before saying, 'Nobody paid my way through Cambridge, Lyall.' Then, deliberately, 'For God's sake pull yourself together. You're not a child any more. And you never were a Jonah – just a bloody great bag of self-pity.'

He was hitting me the moment I turned away. I fell over the chair, upset more by the things he was screaming than by his clumsy attempts to re-enact some schoolyard fight of twenty years before. 'Christ, Lyall, don't be silly!' I shouted. I got the chair between us, but he roared and knocked it away. I made a grab for his windmilling arms; found myself backed into a corner. I got a knock on my cheek which stung my pride. 'You little fucker,' I said, and hit him in the stomach. He fell down, belching and coughing.

I pulled him back into the room and stood over him. His wife discovered us there in our underpants – too old to be scrabbling about on a greasy carpet, too white and ugly to be anything but foolish. 'What's the matter?' she pleaded, befuddled with sleep and staring at my mutilated foot. Lyall said something filthy. 'You'd better look after the baby,' I told her viciously. And then that old terrible boyhood cry of triumph. 'He shouldn't start things he can't finish.'

I got dressed and packed my rucksack, Lyall sniffing and

moaning throughout. As I left, the woman was kneeling over him, wiping his runny nose – but she was gazing up at me. 'No!' I said. 'No more. Not from me. He needs a bloody doctor—' Turning in the doorway: 'Why did you have to lie to him about your age? Couldn't *you* get anybody, either?' I felt a little sick.

It might have ended there, I might have taken away the simplest and most comforting solution to the enigma of Lyall, if I hadn't decided that while (for the second, or, now I could admit it, the third time in my life) I never wanted to see him again, I didn't intend to let him ruin the week or so of holiday I had left to me. It was unthinkable to return to Wandsworth with only that sordid squabble to remember through the winter.

So instead of catching the bus back to Ambleside I moved up the valley to the National Trust site, put up my little Ultimate tent, and for a week at least had some recompense for my stay beneath Raw Pike; pottering about in the silent, stone-choked ghylls of Oxendale, where nobody ever seems to go; drowsing among the glacial moraines of Stake Pass, where dragonflies clatter mournfully through the brittle reed-stems and the path tumbles down its spur into the Langstrath like an invitation; watching the evening climbers on Gimmer, coloured motes against the archaic face of the rock, infinitely slow-moving and precarious.

It was a peculiar time. The heat-wave, rather than abating, merely consolidated its grip and moved into its third week, during which temperatures of a hundred degrees were recorded in Keswick. Dead sheep dotted the fells like *roches moutonees*, and in dry gullies gaped silently over bleached pebbles. A middle-aged couple on a coach-outing for the blind wandered somehow on to the screes at Wastwater, to be discovered on the 1700-foot line by an astonished rescue team and brought down suffering from heat prostration and amnesia. Mickleden Beck diminished to a trickle – at the dam beneath Stickle Breast, exhausted birds littered the old waterline, staring passively up at the quivering peaks.

The camp site was empty, and curiously lethargic. A handful of climbers from Durham university had set up in one field, some boys on an Outward Bound exercise in the other: but there were none of the great blue-and-orange canvas palaces which normally spread their wings beneath

RGJ

Side Pike all summer long, none of the children who in a moment of boredom trip over your guylines on their way to pee secretly in the brook. After dark each night, a few of us clustered round the warden's caravan to hear the ten o'clock national news, while heat-lightning played round Pike o'Stickle then danced gleefully away across Martcrag Moor. Under a fat moon, the valley was greenish and ingenuous, like an ill-lit diorama.

Despite my anger – or perhaps because of it – I couldn't exorcise the Lyalls, and their dreamlike embrace of inadvertency and pain continued to fascinate me. I even broke an excursion to Blea Rigg and Codale to sit on the fellside for half an hour and muse over the cottage, small and precise in the valley; but from up there it was uncommunicative. One of the barn roofs had sagged; there was fresh rubble in the road; the whole place had an air of abandonment and stupefaction in the heat. Where was Lyall?—Prowling hungrily through the Ambleside bookshops, haggling sourly over the price of a papercover thriller now that he couldn't get the *Times*?

And the woman – what elusive thoughts, what trancelike afternoons, staring out into the sunlight and the nettles? Her calm was mysterious. Lyall was destroying her, but she stayed; she was a liar – but there was something dreadfully apt in her vision, her metaphor of entropy. If this seems a detached, academic attitude to her essential misery, it was not one I was able to hold for long. The heat wave mounted past bearing; the valley lay smashed and submissive beneath it; and eight days after my brawl with Lyall, on a night when events human and geological seemed to reach almost consciously toward a state of metaphysical marriage, I was forced from the speculative view and into the full and veritable nightmare.

Sleep was impossible. Later than usual, we gathered round the warden's radio. But for the vibrant greenish haze in the sky, it might have been day. Sweat poured off us. Confused by the evil half-light and the heat rolling out of Mickleden, a pair of wrens were piping miserably and intermittently from the undergrowth by the brook, where a thousand insects hung in the air over an inch of slow water.

With oil-tariff revelations compromising the minority government, public anger mounting over the French agri-

cultural betrayal, and the constant spectre of the Patriotic Front demanding proportional representation from the wings of an already shaky parliament, the political organism had begun to look like some fossil survivor of another age. That night, it seemed to wake up suddenly to its situation; it thrashed and bled in the malarial air of the twentieth century, and over the transistor we followed its final throes; the government fell, and something became extinct in Britain while we slapped our necks to kill midges.

After the announcement a group of the Durham students hung uneasily about in the wedge of yellow light issuing from the warden's door, speechless and shrugging. Later, they probed the bleeding gum cautiously, in undertones, while the warden's wife made tea and the radio mumbled unconvincingly into the night. They seemed reluctant to separate and cross the empty site to empty tents, alone.

It was one of them who, turning eventually to go, drew our attention to a curious noise in the night – a low, spasmodic bubbling, like some thick liquid simmering up out of a hole in the ground. We cocked our heads, laughed at him, and he deferred shyly to our judgement that it was only the brook on the stones beneath the little bridge. But shortly afterwards it came again, closer; and then a third time, not twenty yards away across the car-park.

'There's someone out there,' he said wonderingly. He was a tall, wispy lad with a thin yellow beard and large feet, his face young and concerned and decent even in that peculiar beryline gloom. When we laughed at him again, he said gently, 'I think I'll go and have a look, though.' The gate creaked open, we heard his boots on the gravel. With an edgy grin, one of his friends explained to us, 'Too much ale tonight.' Silence.

Then, 'Oh my God,' he said in a surprised voice. 'You'd better come and do something,' he called, and gave himself up suddenly to a fit of choking and coughing. We found him sitting on the gravel with his head between his knees. He had vomited extensively. On the ground in front of him lay Lyall's wife.

'How did she walk?' he whispered, 'Oh, how did she walk?' He wrapped his arms round his knees and rocked himself to and fro.

She was hideously burnt. Her clothes were inseparable from the charred flesh in which they had become embedded; one ruined eye glared sightlessly out of a massive swelling of

the facial tissue; plasma leaked from the less damaged areas, and she stank of the oven. Whatever fear or determination had driven her from under the shadow of Raw Pike now kept her conscious, staring passively upwards from her good eye, her body quivering gently with shock.

'Egerton,' she said, 'Egerton, Egerton, Egerton—'

I knelt over her.

'—Egerton, Egerton—'

'Someone get that bloody Land Rover across here,' said the warden thickly.

'What happened?' I said. She lay like a blackened log, staring up at the sky. She shuddered convulsively. 'Where's Lyall?

'—Egerton, Egerton, Egerton, Egerton –'

'I'm here.'

But she was dead.

I staggered away to squirt up a thin, painful stream of bile. The warden followed me. 'Did she know you?' he said. 'Where did she come from? What's happened?' I wiped my mouth. How could I tell? She had come to get help from me, but not for herself. I hang on to that thought, even now. With some idea of protecting Lyall, at least until I could get to him, I said, 'I've never seen her before in my life. Look, I've got to go. Excuse me.'

I felt him staring after me. The Land Rover was manoeuvering nervously round the car-park, but now they had nowhere to take her. The boy from Durham was asking himself, over and over again, 'How did she *get* here?' He appealed to his friends, but they were shaken and grey-faced, and they didn't know what to say.

It was past midnight when I left the camp site. An almost constant flicker of heat-lightning lent a macabre formality to the lane, the hills and the dry-stone walls – like subjects in some steel engraving or high-contrast photograph, they were perfectly defined but quite unreal. At Middlefell Farm the lights were all out. Some sheep stared at me from a paddock, their sides heaving and their eyes unearthly.

I lurched along under that hot green sky for forty minutes, but it seemed longer. Like a fool, I kept looking for signs of the woman's blind, agonised flight: had she fallen here, and dragged herself a little way?—And there, had it seemed impossible to drive the quivering insensate hulk a yard

further? I was brought up short, stupid and horrified, by every smear of melted tar on the road; yet I ignored the only real event of the journey.

I had stopped for a moment to put my back against a drystone and massage the cramped calf of my left leg. A curlew was fluting tentatively from the deep Gothic cleft of Dungeon Ghyll. I had been gazing vacantly down the valley for perhaps half a minute, trying to control my erratic breathing, when the sky over Ambleside seemed to *pulse* suddenly, as if some curious shift of energy states had taken place. Simultaneously, the road lurched beneath me.

I felt it distinctly: a brief, queasy swaying motion. And when I touched the wall behind me, a faint tremor was in it, a fading vibration. I was dazed through lack of proper sleep; I was obsessed – and knew it – by the grim odyssey of Lyall's wife: I put the tremor down to dizziness, and attributed that strange transitional flicker of the air to a flare of lightning somewhere over Troutbeck, a flash partially occluded by the mass of the fells between. But when I moved on, the peculiar hue of the sky was brighter; and although the event seemed to have no meaning at the time, it was to prove of central significance in the culminating nightmare.

The smoke was visible from quite a long way off, drifting filmy and exhausted up the fellside, clinging to the spongy ash and shrivelled bracken stems of that previous fire, to be trapped by an inversion about a hundred feet below Raw Pike and spread out in a thin cloudbank the colour of watered milk.

Lyall's cottage was ruined. Both barns were down in a heap of lamp-blacked stone, here and there an unconsumed rafter or beam sticking up out of the mess; the roof of the main building had caved in, taking the upper floor with it, so that there remained only a shell full of smoking slates and white soft ash. It radiated an intense heat, and the odd glowing cinder raced erratically up from it on the updraughts, but the fire *per se* had burnt itself out long before.

The wreckage was curiously uncompact. An explosion, probably of the kitchen gas-cylinders, had flung rubble into the nettle patch; and for some reason most of the face of the building lay in the road.

There among a tangle of smashed window frames and furniture, motionless in contemplation of the wreck and looking infinitely lonely, stood the long, ungainly figure of

Lyall. His tweed jacket had gone through at the elbows, his trousers were charred and filthy, and his shoes were falling to pieces, as if he'd been trampling about in the embers looking for something. I began to shout his name long before I reached him. He studied my limping, hasty progress down the road for a moment; then, as I got close, seemed to lose interest.

'Lyall!' I called. 'Are you all right?'

I kicked my way through the rubbish and shook his shoulder. He watched a swirl of ash dance over the deep embers. Something popped and cracked comfortably down in that hot pit. When he faced me, his eyes, red and sore, glowed out of his stubbled, smoke-blackened face with another kind of heat. But his voice was quite inoffensive when he said, 'Hello Egerton. I didn't get much stuff out, you see.' Stacked neatly in the road a few yards off were twenty or thirty charred paperbacks. 'She came to fetch you, then?'

He stared absently at the ruin. I had expected to find something more than a drowsy child, parching its skin in some reverie over the remains of a garden bonfire. I was sickened. 'Lyall, you bloody moron!' I shouted: 'She's *dead*!' He moved his shoulders slightly, stared on. I caught hold of his arm and shook him. He was relaxed, unresistant. 'Did you send her away in that condition? Are you mad? She was burnt to pieces!' I might have been talking to myself. 'What's been *happening* here?'

When he finally pulled up out of the dry trap of ashes, it was to shake his head slowly and say, 'What? I don't know.' He gaped, he blinked, he whispered, 'She was getting so old. It was my fault—' He seemed about to explain something, but never did. That open-mouthed pain, that terrible passive acceptance of guilt, was probably the last glimpse I had of Lyall the human being. Had he, at some point during the dreadful events of that night, actually faced and recognised the corroding power of his self-concern? At the time I thought I understood it all – and standing uselessly amid all that rubble I needed to believe he had.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

At this the most inhuman paroxism of misery and loathing took hold of his swollen, grimy features. 'Fuck you, Egerton!' he cried. He threw off my hand. For a second, I was physically afraid, and backed quickly away from him. He followed me, with, 'What's it got to do with you? What's

any of it got to do with you?' Then, quieter, 'I can't seem to—'

The spasm passed. He looked down at his blistered hands as if seeing them for the first time. He laughed. His eyes flickered over me, cruel as heat lightning. 'Bugger off back home then Egerton, if you feel like that,' he said. He put his hands in his trouser pockets and stirred the rubble with his toe. '*I* didn't break the bloody piano, and I'll tell the old bitch I didn't—' He whirled away and strode off rapidly across the scorched fellside, stopping only to pick up an armful of books and call: 'I'm sick of all this filthy rubbish anyway.'

Smoke wreathed round him. I saw him turn north and begin to climb.

With this absurd transition into the dimension of height began what must surely be the most extraordinary episode of the entire business. Lyall stalked away from me up the fell. Amazed, I shouted after him. When he ignored me, I could only follow: he may or may not have had suicidal intentions, but he was certainly mad; in either case, if only out of common humanity, I couldn't just stand there and watch him go.

It might have been better if I had.

He made straight for Raw Pike, and then, his torso seeming to drift legless above the pall of white smoke that hung beneath the outcrop, bore west to begin a traverse which took us into the deep and difficult gullies between Whitegill Crag and Mill Gill. Here, he seemed to become lost for a while, and I gained on him.

He blundered about those stony vegetation-choked clefts like a sick animal, trying to scale waterslides or scrape his way up the low but steep rock walls. His shoes had fallen off his feet, and he was leaving a damp, urgent trail. He ignored me if I called his name, but he was quite aware of my presence, and took a patent delight in picking at his emotional scabs, real or imagined, whenever I got close enough to hear him. His voice drifted eerily down the defiles. The piano seemed to preoccupy him.

'*I* never broke it,' I heard, in a self-congratulatory tone, then: 'Nowhere near it, Miss,' mumbled as part of a dialogue in which he took both parts. She didn't believe him, of course, and he became progressively more sullen. Later,

groping for a handhold three feet above his head, he burst out angrily, 'You can tell him I *won't* be responsible for the bloody things. Staff loss isn't *my* problem.' His hold turned out to be a clump of shallow-rooted heather, which came out when he put his weight on it. He laughed. 'Go and lick her arse then—'

In this way, he visited almost every period of his life. He met his wife down by the Thames, in a filthy March wind; later, they whispered to one another at night in his Holloway flat. He conjured up mutual acquaintances from Cambridge, and set them posturing like the dowdy flamingoes they had undoubtedly been. And once my own voice startled me, echoing pompously over the fells as part of some student dispute which must have seemed excruciatingly important at the time, and which I still can't remember.

When he finally broke out on to the east bank of Mill Gill, he stared back at me for a moment as if reassuring himself that I was still there. He even nodded to me, with a sort of grim approval. Then he lurched unsteadily through the bracken to the ghyll itself and dropped his paperbacks into it one by one, looking over his shoulder each time to see if I was watching. He crouched there like a child, studying each bright jacket as it slipped beneath the surface of the water and was whirled away. His shoulders were moving, but I couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying.

It was during the latter part of this unburdening that the earth began to shake again – and this time in earnest. I sensed rather than saw that energetic transition of the air. The whole sky pulsed, flickered with lightning, seemed to stabilise. Then, with an enormous rustling noise, the fell beneath my feet shifted and heaved, lifting itself into a long curved wave which raced away from me up the slopes to explode against the dark rock of Tarn Crag in a shower of small stones and uprooted bracken.

I tottered about, shouting, 'Lyall! Lyall!' until a second, more powerful shock threw me off my feet and sent me rolling twenty or thirty feet down toward the road.

Mill Gill gaped. The last paperback vanished. A groan came up out of the earth. Abruptly, the air was full of loose soil and rock-chippings, mud and spray from the banks of the ghyll. Lyall stared up through it at the throbbing sky; spun

round and set off up the path to Stickle Tarn at a terrific rate, his long legs pumping up and down. Rocks blundered and rumbled round him – he brandished his fist at the hills. 'Lyall, for God's sake come back!' I begged, but my voice was sucked away into the filthy air, and all I could see of him was a dim untiring figure, splashing across the ghyll where Tarn Crag blocks the direct route.

I put my head down into the murk and scrambled upward. Black water vomited suddenly down the ghyll, full of dead sheep and matted vegetation. Through the spray of a new waterfall I had a glimpse of Lyall waving his arms about and croaking demented challenges at a landscape that changed even as he opened his mouth. Twice, I got quite close behind him; once, I grabbed his arm, but he only thrashed about and shouted 'Bugger off home, Egerton!' over the booming of the water.

Five hundred feet of ascent opened up the gully and spread Stickle Tarn before us, the colour of lead: fifty acres of sullen water simmering in its dammed-up glacial bowl. Up there on the 1500-foot line, out of the confines of the ghyll, it was quieter and the earth seemed less agitated. But the dam was cracked; a hot wind rumbled through the high passes and gusted across the cirque; and up out of the black screes on the far bank of the tarn there loomed like a threat the massive, seamed face of the Borrowdale Volcanics

Pavey Ark lowered down at us, crawling with boulder slides and crowned with heat lightning: the highest sheer drop in the Central Fells, four hundred and eighty million years old – impassive, unbending, orogenetic. A constant stream of material was pouring like fine dust from the bilberry terraces at its summit two thousand feet above sea level, crushed volcanic agglomerate whirling and smoking across the face; while, down by the water, larger rocks dislodged from the uneasy heights bounced a hundred feet into the air in explosions of scree.

Lyall stood stock-still, staring up at it.

Beside him, the dam creaked and flexed. A ton of water spilled over the parapet and roared away down Mill Gill. He paid it not the slightest attention, simply stood there, drenched and muddy, moving his head fractionally from side to side as he traced one by one the scars of that horrific cliff, like a man following a page of print with his index finger: Great Gully, unclimbable without equipment, Gwynne's Chimney, Little Gully, and, tumbling from the

western pinnacle to the base of East Buttress, the long precipitous grooves and terraces of Jack's Rake.

He was looking for a way up.

'Lyall,' I said, 'haven't you come far enough?'

He shrugged. Without a word, he set off round the margin of the tarn.

I'm convinced that following him further would have done no good: he had been determined on this course perhaps as far back as Cambridge, certainly since his crisis of self-confidence in the cottage. Anyway, my foot had become unbearably painful: it was as much as I could do to catch up with him half-way round the tarn, and, by actually grabbing the tail of his jacket, force him to stop.

We struggled stupidly for a moment, tottering in and out of the warm shallows – the Ark towering above us like a repository of all uncommitted Ordovician time. Lyall disengaged himself and ran off a little way. He put his head on one side and regarded me warily, chest heaving.

Then he nodded to himself, returned, and, keeping well out of my reach, said quite amiably, 'I'm going up, Egerton. It's too late to stop me, you know.' Something detached itself from the cliff and fell into the tarn like a small bomb going off. He spun round, screaming and waving his fist. 'Leave me alone! Fuck off!' He watched the water subside. He showed his teeth. 'Listen, you bastard,' he said quietly: 'Why don't you just chuck yourself in *that*?' And he pointed to the torrent rumbling over the dam and down Mill Gill. 'For all the help you've ever been to me, you might as well—'

He began to walk away. He stopped, tore at his hair, made an apologetic gesture in my direction. His face crumpled, and the Lyall I had beaten up in the living room of his own house looked out of it. 'I can't seem to stop going up, Egerton,' he whispered, 'I can't seem to stop doing it—'

But when I stepped forward, he shook with laughter. 'That got you going, you bloody oaf!' he gasped. And he stumbled off toward the screes.

It really would have done no good to go with him. Once or twice on the long walk back to the dam, I actually turned and began to follow him again. But it was useless: by then, distance and the Ark had made of him a small mechanical

toy. I called for him to wait, but he couldn't have heard me; in the end, I made my way up the northern slopes of Tarn Crag (I had to cross the dam to do it – I waited for a lull, but even so my feet were in six inches of fast water as I went over, and my skin crawled with every step) and from there watched his inevitable ascent.

He crabbed about at the base of the Great Gully for a while, presumably looking for a way up; when this proved impracticable, he made a high easterly traverse of the screes and vanished into the shadow of East Buttress: to reappear ten minutes later, inching his way up Jack's Rake – an infinitely tiny, vulnerable mote against the face.

I didn't really imagine he would do it. God knows why I chose that moment to be 'sensible' about him. I sat down and unlaced my boots, petulantly determined to see him through what was after all a rather childish adventure, and then say nothing about it when the cliff itself had sent him chastened away. There was so little excuse for this that it seems mad now, of course: the Ark was shaking and shifting, the very air about it groaned and rang with heat; St Elmo's fire writhed along its great humped outline. How on earth I expected him to survive, I don't know.

He was invisible for minutes at a time even on the easy stretch up to the ashtree at the entrance of Rake End Chimney, inundated by that curtain of debris blowing across the sheer walls above him. He tried confusedly to scale the chimney; failed; trudged doggedly on up, the temperature rising as he went. A smell of dust and lightning filled the air. Negotiating the fifty degree slope of the second pitch, he was forced to cling to the rock for nearly half an hour while tons of rubble thundered past him and into the tarn below. He should have been crushed; he must have been injured in some way, for it took him almost as long to complete fifteen yards of fairly simple scrambling along the Easy Terrace.

Perhaps I remembered too late that Lyall was a human being; but from that point on, I could no longer minimise the obsession that had driven him up there. When some internal rupture of the cliff flooded the channels above him and turned the Rake into a high-level drainage culvert, I could hear only that despairing mumble in the cottage at night, the voice of his wife; when he windmilled his arms against the rush of the water, regained his balance and

crawled on up, insensate and determined, I bit my lip until it bled. Perhaps it's never too late.

In some peculiar way the Ark too seemed to respond to his efforts: two thousand feet up, spidering across the Great Gully and heading for the summit wall, he moved into quietude; the boulder slides diminished, the cliff stood heavy and passive, like a cow in heat. Down below, on Tarn Crag, the earth ceased to tremble. Stickle Tarn calmed, and lay like a vat of molten beryl, reflecting the vibrant, acid sky: there were no more shadows, and, when I took off my shirt to dip it in the Tarn Crag pool, I felt no movement of the air. Hundreds of small birds were rustling uncomfortably about in the heather; while up above the blind, blunt head of Harrison Stickle, one hawk wheeled in slow, magnificent circles.

Twenty minutes after his successful negotiation of the Great Gully intersection, Lyall crossed the summit wall. There I lost him for a short period. What he did there, I have no clue. Perhaps he simply wandered among the strange nodulate boulders and shallow rock pools of the region. But if any transition took place, if his sour and ludicrous metaphysic received its final unimaginable blessing, it must have come there, between summit wall and summit cairn, between the cup and the lip, while I fretted and stalked below.

All this aside: suddenly, the peaks about me flared and wavered ecstatically; and he was standing by the cairn—

He was almost invisible: but I can imagine him there, with his arms upraised, his raw wrists poking out of the sleeves of his tweed jacket: no more unengaging or desperate, no stranger than he had ever been among the evening mists of Cambridge or the broken milk machines of Holloway: except that, now, static electricity is playing over him like fire, and his mouth is open in a great disgusted shout that reaches me quite clearly through the still, haunted air—

For a moment, everything seemed to pause. The sky broadcast a heat triumphant – a long, high, crystalline song, taken up and echoed by summit after summit, from Wetherlam and the Coniston Old Man, from Scafell Pike and the unbearable resonant fastnesses of Glaramara, never fading. For a moment, Lyall stood transfigured, perched between his own madness and the madness of an old geography. Then, as his cry died away to leave the cry of the sky supreme, a series of huge cracks and ruptures spread out

across the cliff face from beneath his feet; and, with a sound like the tearing of vast lace, the whole immense façade of Pavey Ark began to slide slowly into the tarn beneath.

Dust plumed half a mile into the air; on a mounting roar the cliff, like an old sick woman, fell to its knees in the cirque; the high bilberry terraces poised themselves for a long instant, then, lowering themselves gently down, evaporated into dust. Millions of tons of displaced water smashed the dam and went howling down Mill Gill, crashing from wall to wall; to spill – black and invincible, capped with a dirty grey spume – across the valley and break like a giant sea against the lower slopes of Oak Howe and Side Pike. Before the Ark had finished its weary slide, the valley road was no more, the New Hotel and Side House were rubbish on a long wave – and that pit of ashes, Lyall's house, was extinguished forever.

I watched the ruin without believing it. I remember saying something like, 'For God's sake, Lyall—' Then I turned and ran for my life over the quaking crag, east toward the safety of Blea Rigg and the fell route to an Ambleside I was almost frightened to reach. As I went, an ordinary darkness was filtering across the sky; a cool wind sprang up; and there were rain clouds already racing in from the Irish Sea along a stormy front.

Even allowing for the new unreliability of the press, exoteric explanations of the Great Langdale earth movement – activity renewed among the Borrowdale Volcanics after nearly five hundred million years; the unplanned landing of some enormous Russian space probe – seem ridiculous to me. Beyond the discovery of that poor woman, there were no witnesses other than myself in the immediate area. Was *Lyall*, then, responsible for the destruction of Pavey Ark?

It seems incredible: and yet, in the face of his death, insignificant. He carried his own entropy around with him, which makes him seem monstrous, perhaps; I don't know. He believed in an executive misery, and that should be enough for any of us. It hardly matters to me now. Other events swept it away almost immediately.

As I stumbled through the dim, panicky streets of Ambleside in the aftermath of the earthquake, the Patriotic Front was issuing from dusty suburban drill halls and Boy Scout-huts all over the country; and by noon England, seventy

years too late, was taking her first hesitant but heady steps into this century of violence. Grouped about the warden's radio in the still, stupefied night, we could have guessed at something of the sort. I understand now why the Durham students were so affected: students have suffered more than most as the Front tightens its political grip.

In dreams, I blame Lyall for that, too; equate the death of reason with the collapse of Pavey Ark; and watch England crawl past me over and again in the guise of a burnt woman on her desperate journey to the head of a valley that turns out every time to be impassive and arid. But awake I am more reasonable, and I have a job at the new sports shop in Chamonix. It's no hardship to sell other climbers their perlon and pitons – although the younger ones will keep going up alone, against all advice. Like many of the more fortunate refugees I have been allowed to take a limited French nationality; I even have a second class passport, but I doubt if I shall ever go back.

Walking about the town, I still hate to look up, in case the cruel and naked peaks surprise me from between the housetops: but the pain of that wound is at least explicable, whereas Lyall—

Everyone who ever met Lyall contributed in some small way to his death. It might have been averted perhaps, if, in some Cambridge mist of long ago, I had only come upon the right thing to say; and I behaved very badly toward him later: but it seems as futile to judge myself on that account as to be continually interpreting and reinterpreting the moment at which I was forced to realise that one man's raw and gaping self-concern had brought down a mountain.

And I prefer to picture Stickle Tarn not as it looked from the 1600-foot contour during Lyall's final access of rage and despair, but as I remember it from my Cambridge days and before – a wide, cold pool in the shadow of an ancient and beautiful cliff, where on grey windy days a seabird you can never identify seems always to be trawling twenty feet above the water in search of something it probably can't even define to itself.

WHITE STARS

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

A Tale of the Dancers at the End of Time

Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the World!
You, too, have come where the dim tides are hurled
Upon the wharves of sorrow, and heard ring
The bell that calls us on: the sweet far thing.
Beauty grown sad with its eternity
Made you of us, and of the dim grey sea.
Our long ships loose thought-woven sails and wait,
For God has bid them share an equal fate;
And when at last, defeated in His wars,
They have gone down under the same white stars,
We shall no longer hear the little cry
Of our sad hearts, that may not live nor die.

W. B. Yeats

I

A Brief Word from Our Auditor

If these fragments of tales from the End of Time appear to have certain themes in common, then it is the auditor and his informants who must be held responsible for the selection they have made from available information; a fashion for philosophical and sociological rediscovery certainly prevailed during this period, but there must have been other incidents which did not reflect the fashion as strongly and we promise the reader that if we should hear of some such story we shall not hesitate to present it. Yet legends – whether they come to us from past or future – have a habit of appealing to certain ages in certain interpretations and that factor, too, must be considered, we suppose.

This story, said to involve among others the Iron Orchid, Bishop Castle and Lord Shark, is amended, interpreted, embellished by your auditor, but in its essentials is the same as he heard it from his most familiar source, the temporal excursionist, Miss Una Persson.

A Stroll Across the Dark Continent

'We were all puzzled by him,' agreed the Duke of Queens as he stepped carefully over an elephant, 'but we put it down to an idiosyncratic sense of humour.' He removed his feathered hat and wiped his brow. The redder plumes clashed horribly with his cerise skin.

'Some of his jokes,' said the Iron Orchid with a glance of distaste at the crocodile clinging by its teeth to her left foot, 'were rather difficult to see. However, he seems at one with himself now. Wouldn't you say?' She shook the reptile loose.

'Oh, yes! But then I'm notorious for my lack of insight.' They strolled away from Southern Africa into the delicate knee-high forests of the Congo. The Iron Orchid smiled with delight at the brightly coloured little birds which flitted about her legs, sometimes clinging to the hem of her parchment skirt before flashing away again. Of all the expressions of the Duke's obsession with the ancient nation called by him 'Afrique', this seemed to her to be the sweetest.

They were discussing Lord Jagged of Canaria (who had vanished at about the same time as the Iron Orchid's son Jherek).

Offering no explanation as to how his friends might have found themselves, albeit for a very short while, in 19th century London, together with himself, Jherek, some cyclopean aliens, Mrs Amelia Underwood and an assortment of natives of the period, Jagged had returned, only to hide himself away underground.

'Well,' said the Duke, dismissing the matter, 'it was rewarding, even if it does suggest, as Brannart Morphail somewhat emphatically pointed out, that Time itself is becoming unstable. It must be because of all these other disruptions in the universe we are hearing about.'

'It is very confusing,' said the Iron Orchid with disap-

proval. 'I do hope the end of the world, when it comes, will be a little better organised.' She turned. 'Duke?' He had disappeared.

With a smile of apology he clambered back to land. 'Lake Tanganyika,' he explained. 'I knew I'd misplaced it.' He used one of his power rings to dissipate the water in his clothing.

'It is the trees,' she said. 'They are too tall.' She was having difficulty in pressing on through the waist-high palms. 'I do believe I've squashed one of your villages, Duke.'

'Please don't concern yourself, lovely Iron Orchid. I've crowded too much in. You know how I respond to a challenge!' He looked vaguely about him, seeking a way through the jungle. 'It is uncomfortably hot.'

'Is not your sun rather close?' she suggested.

'That must be it.' He made an adjustment to a ruby power ring and the miniature sun rose, then moved to the left, sinking again behind a hillock he had called Kilamanjaro, offering them a pleasant twilight.

'That's much better.'

He took her hand and led her towards Kenya, where the trees were sparser. A cloud of tiny flamingoes fluttered around her, like midges, for a moment and then were gone on their way back to their nesting places.

'I do love this part of the evening, don't you?' he said. 'I would have it all the time, were I not afraid it would begin to pall.'

'One must orchestrate,' she murmured, glad that his taste seemed, at long last, to be improving.

'One must moderate.'

'Indeed.' He helped her across the bridge over the Indian Ocean. He looked back on Afrique, his stance melancholy and romantic. 'Farewell Cape City,' he proclaimed, 'farewell Byzantium, Dodge and Limoges; farewell the verdant plains of Chad and the hot-springs of Egypt. Farewell!'

The Duke of Queens and the Iron Orchid climbed into his monoplane, parked near by. Overhead now a bronze and distant sun brightened a hazy, yellow sky; on the horizon were old, worn mountains which, judging by their peculiar brown colouring, might even have been an original part of the Earth's topography, for hardly anyone visited this area.

As the duke pondered the controls, the Iron Orchid put her head to one side, for she thought she had heard something. 'Do you detect,' she asked, 'a sort of clashing sound?'

'I have not yet got the engine started.'

'Over there, I mean.' She pointed. 'Are those people?'

He peered in the direction she indicated. 'Some dust rising, certainly. And, yes, perhaps two figures. Who could it be?'

'Shall we see?'

'If you wish, we can—' He had depressed a button and the rest of his remark was drowned by the noise of his engine. The propeller began to spin and whine and then fell from the nose, bouncing over the barren ground and into the Indian Ocean. He pressed the button again and the engine stopped. 'We can walk there,' he concluded. They descended from the monoplane.

The ground they crossed was parched and cracked like old leather which had not been properly cared for.

'This needs a thorough restoration,' said the Iron Orchid somewhat primly. 'Who usually occupies this territory?'

'You see him,' murmured the Duke of Queens, for now it was possible to recognise one of the figures.

'Aha!' She was not surprised. It had been two or three centuries since she had last seen the man who, with a bright strip of metal clutched in one gauntletted hand, capered back and forth in the dust, while a second individual, also clasping an identical strip, performed similar steps. From time to time they would bring their strips forcefully together, resulting in the clashing sound the Iron Orchid had heard originally.

'Lord Shark the Unknown,' said the Duke of Queens. He called out: 'Greetings to you, my mysterious Lord Shark!'

The man half-turned. The other figure leapt forward and touched his body with his metal strip. Lord Shark gasped and fell to one knee. Through the fishy mask he always wore, his red eyes glared at them.

They came up to him. He did not rise. Instead he presented his gauntletted palm. 'Look!' Crimson liquid glistened.

The Iron Orchid inspected it. 'Is it unusual?'

'It is blood, madam!' Lord Shark rose painfully to his feet. 'My blood.'

'Then you must repair yourself at once.'

'It is against my principles.'

Lord Shark's companion stood some distance away, wiping Lord Shark's blood from his weapon.

'That, I take it, is a sword,' said the Iron Orchid. 'I

ad always imagined them larger, and more ornate.'
'I know such swords.' Lord Shark the Unknown loosened he long white scarf he wore around his dark grey neck and pplied it to the wound in his shoulder. 'They are decadent. hese,' he held up his own, 'are finely tempered, perfectly alanced epées. We were duelling,' he explained, 'my utomaton and I.'
Looking across at the machine, the Iron Orchid saw that t was a reproduction of Lord Shark himself, complete with ierce shark-mask.
'It could kill you, could it not?' she asked. 'Is it programmed to resurrect you, Lord Shark?'
He dismissed her question with a wave of his blood-tained scarf.
'And strange, that you should be killed, as it were, by ourself,' she added.
'When we fight, is it not always with ourselves, madam?'
'I really don't know, sir, for I have never fought and I now no-one who does.'
'That is why I must make automata. You know my name, nadam, but I fear you have the advantage of me.'
'It has been so long. I looked quite different when we last net. At Mongrove's Black Ball, you'll recall. I am the Iron Orchid.'
'Ah, yes.' He bowed.
'And I am the Duke of Queens,' said the duke kindly.
'I know you, Duke of Queens. But you had another name, hen, did you not?'
'Liam Ty Pam Caesar Lloyd George Zatopek Finsbury Ronnie Michelangelo Yurio Iopu 4578 Rew United,' supplied the duke. 'Would that be it?'
'As I remember, yes.' A sigh escaped the gash which was he shark's mouth. 'So there have been some few small hanges in the outside world, in society. But I suppose you till while away your days with petty conceits?'
'Oh, yes!' said the Iron Orchid enthusiastically. 'They ave been at their best this season. Have you seen the uke's "Afrique"? All in miniature. Over there.'
'Is that what it is called. I wondered. I had been growing ichen, but no matter.'
'I spoiled a project of yours?' The duke was mortified.
Lord Shark shrugged.
'But, my lonely lord, I must make amends.'
The eyes behind the mask became interested for a

moment. 'You would fight with me. A duel? Is that what you mean?'

'Well . . .' The Duke of Queens fingered his chin. 'If that would placate you, certainly. Though I've had no practice at it.'

The light in the eyes dimmed. 'True. It would be no fight at all.'

'But,' said the Duke, 'lend me one of your machines to teach me, and I will return at an agreed hour. What say you?'

'No, no, sir. I took no umbrage. I should not have suggested it. Let us part, for I weary very swiftly of human company.' Lord Shark sheathed his sword and snapped his fingers at his automaton which copied the gesture. 'Good day to you, Iron Orchid. And to you, Duke of Queens.' He bowed again.

Ignoring the Iron Orchid's restraining hand upon his sleeve, the duke stepped forward as Lord Shark turned away. 'I insist upon it, sir.'

His dark grey, leathery cloak rustling, the masked recluse faced them again. 'It would certainly fulfil an ambition. But it would have to be done properly, and only when you had thoroughly learned the art. And there would have to be an understanding as to rules.'

'Anything.' The duke made an elaborate bow. 'Send me, at your convenience, an instructor.'

'Very well.' Lord Shark the Unknown signed to his automaton and together they began to walk across the plain, towards the brown mountains. 'You will hear from me soon, sir.'

'I thank you, sir.'

They strolled in the direction of the useless monoplane. The duke seemed very pleased. 'What a wonderful new fashion,' he remarked, 'duelling. And this time, with the exception of Lord Shark, of course, I *shall* be the first.'

The Iron Orchid was amused. 'Shall we all, soon, be drawing one another's blood with those thin sticks of steel, extravagant duke?'

He laughed and kissed her cheek. 'Why not? I tire of "Cities", and even "Continents" pall. How long is it since we have had a primitive sport?'

'Nothing since the ballhead craze,' she confirmed.

'I shall learn all I can, and then I can teach others. When

Jherek returns, we shall have something fresh for him to enjoy.'

'It will, at least, be in keeping with his current obsessions, as I understand them.'

Privately, the Iron Orchid wondered if the duke would, at last, be responsible for an entirely new fashion. She hoped, for his sake, that he would, but it was hard, at the moment, to see the creative possibilities of the medium. She was afraid that it would not catch on.

3

Something of the History of Lord Shark the Unknown

If gloomy Mongrove, now touring what was left of the galaxy with the alien Yusharisp, had affected aloofness, then Lord Shark was, without question, genuinely reclusive. Absorbed in his duel, he had not noticed the approach of the Iron Orchid and the Duke of Queens, for if he had he would have made good his escape well before they could have hailed him. In all his life, he had found pleasure in the company of only one human being: a short-lived time-traveller who had refused immortality and died many centuries since.

Lord Shark was not merely contemptuous of the society which presently occupied the planet, he was contemptuous of the very planet, the universe, of the whole of existence. Compared with him, Werther de Goethe was an optimist (as, indeed, secretly he was). Werther had once made overtures to Lord Shark, considering him a fellow spirit, but Lord Shark would have none of him, judging him to be as silly and as affected as all the others. Lord Shark was the last true cynic alive and found no pleasure in any pursuit save the pursuit of death, and in this he must be thought the unluckiest man in the world, for everything conspired to thwart him. Wounded, he refused to treat the wounds, and they healed. Injured, his injuries were never critical. He considered suicide, as such, to be unworthy of him, feeble, but dangers which would have brought certain death to others, only seemed to bring Lord Shark at best some passing inconvenience.

As he returned home, Lord Shark could feel the pain in his shoulder already subsiding and he knew that it would not

be long before there would be only a small scar to show where the sword-blade had entered. He was already regretting his bargain with the Duke of Queens. He was sure that the duke would never attain the skill necessary to beat him and, if he were not beaten, and killed, he would in his opinion have wasted his time. His pride now refused to let him go back on the bargain, for to do so would be to show him as feckless a fellow as any other and would threaten his confidence in his own superiority, his only consolation. It was the pride of the profoundly unimaginative man, for it was Lord Shark's lot to be without creative talent of any kind, in a world where all were artists – good or bad, but artists, still. Even his mask was not of his own invention, but had been made for him by his time-travelling friend shortly before that man's death (his name had come from the same source). He had taken both mask and name without humour, on good faith. It is perhaps unkind to speculate as to whether even this stalwart friend had been unable to resist playing one good joke upon poor Lord Shark, for it is a truism that those without humour find themselves the butts of all who possess even a spark of it themselves.

Whoever had created Lord Shark (and he had never been able to discover who his parents might be, perhaps because they were too embarrassed to claim him) might well have set out to create a perfect misanthrope, a person as unsuited to this particular society as was possible. If so, they had achieved their ambition absolutely. He had appeared in public only twice in the thousand or so years of his life, and the last time had been three hundred years ago at Mongrove's celebrated Black Ball. Lord Shark had stayed little more than half-an-hour at this, having rapidly reached the conclusion that it was as pointless as all the other social activities on the planet. He had considered time-travel, as an escape, but every age he had studied seemed equally frivolous and he had soon ceased to entertain that scheme. He contented himself with his voluntary exile, his contempt, his conviction in the pointlessness of everything, and he continued to seek ways of dying suggested to him by his studies of history. His automata were created in his own image not from perversity, nor from egocentricity, but because no other image presented itself to his mind.

Lord Shark trudged on, his grey-booted feet making the dust of his arid domain dance, giving the landscape a semblance of life, and came in a while to his rectangular

lomicile at the foot of those time-ground ridges, the ragged emains of the Rockies. Two guards, each in appearance dentical to each other and to Lord Shark, were positioned on either side of his single small door and they remained igid, only their eyes following him as he let himself in and narched up the long, straight, sparsely-lit passage which passed through the centre of the internal grid (the house was divided into exactly equal sections, with rooms of exactly equal proportions) to the central chamber of the building in which he spent the greater part of his days. There he sat himself down upon a chair of grey metal and began to brood.

Regretfully, he must pursue his agreement with the Duke of Queens, but he felt no demand to hurry the business through; the longer it took, the better.

4

In Which Unwilling Travellers Arrive at the End of Time

Walking slowly across the ceiling of his new palace, the Duke of Queens looked up to see that Bishop Castle had already arrived and was peering with some pleasure through a window. 'Shall we join him?' asked the duke of the Iron Orchid and, at her nod of assent, turned a jewel on one of his rings. Elegantly they performed half a somersault so that they, too, were upside down and, from their new perspective, descending towards the floor. Bishop Castle hailed them. 'Such a simple idea, duke, but beautiful.' He waved a white-gloved hand at the view. The sky now lay like a sea, spread out below, while inverted trees and gardens and lawns were overhead.

'It is refreshing,' confirmed the duke, pleased. 'But I can take no credit. The idea was the Iron Orchid's.'

'Nonsense, most dashing of dukes. Actually,' she murmured to Bishop Castle, 'I borrowed it from Sweet Orb Mace. How is she, by the by?'

'Recovered completely, though the resurrection was a little late. I believe the snow helped preseve her, for all its heat.'

'We have just seen Lord Shark the Unknown,' she announced. 'And he challenged the Duke of Queens to, my lord bishop, a *duel*!'

'It was not exactly a challenge, luscious blossom. Merely an agreement to fight at some future date.'

'To fight?' Bishop Castle's large eyebrows rose, almost touching the rim of his tall crown. 'Would that involve "violence"?'

'A degree of it, I believe,' said the duke demurely. 'Yes, blood will be spilled, if today's experience is typical. These little sticks . . .' He turned with a questioning frown to the Iron Orchid.

'Swords,' she said.

'Yes, swords – with points, you know, to pierce the flesh. You will have seen them in the old pictures and possibly wondered at their function. We have used them for decoration, of course, in the past – many believing them to be some sort of ancient totem, some symbol of rank – but it emerges that they were meant to kill.'

Bishop Castle was apologetic. 'The conceptions involved are a little difficult to grasp, as with so many of these ancient pastimes, though of course I have witnessed, in visitors to our age, the phenomena. Does it not involve "anger", however?'

'Not necessarily, from what little I know.'

The conversation turned to other subjects; they discussed their recent adventures and speculated upon the whereabouts of the Iron Orchid's son, Jherek Carnelian, of Mrs Underwood, whom he loved, of Lord Jagged of Canaria, and the uncouth alien musicians who had called themselves the Lat.

'Brannart Morphail, querulous as ever, refuses to discuss any part he might have played in the affair,' Bishop Castle told his friends. 'He merely hints at the dangers of "meddling with the fabric of Time", but I cannot believe he is entirely objective, for he has always affected a somewhat proprietorial attitude towards Time.'

'Nonetheless, it *is* puzzling,' said the Iron Orchid. 'And I regret the disappearance of so many entertaining people. Those space-travellers, the Lat, were they, do you think, "violent"?'

'That would explain the difficulties we had in communicating with them, certainly. But we can talk further when we see My Lady Charlotina.' Bishop Castle was evidently tiring of the discussion. 'Shall we go?'

As they drifted, still upside down, from the house, Bishop Castle complimented the Iron Orchid on her costume. It was

dark blue and derived from the clothing of some of those he had encountered at the Café Royal, in the 19th century. The helmet suited her particularly, but Bishop Castle was not sure he liked the moustache.

Righting themselves, they all climbed into Bishop Castle's air-carriage, a reproduction of a space vehicle of the 300th Icecream Empire, all red-gold curlicues and silver body work, and set off for Lake Billy the Kid where My Lady Charlotina's reception (to celebrate, as she put it, their safe return) had already started.

They had gone no more than a few hundred miles when they encountered Werther de Goethe, magnificently pale in black, voluminous satin robes, riding upon his monstrous tombstone, a slab of purple marble, and evidently recovered from his recent affair with Mistress Christia, the Everlasting Concubine, in such good spirits that he deigned to acknowledge their presence as they put their heads through the portholes and waved to him. The slab swung gracefully over the tops of some tall pine trees and came to rest, hovering near them.

'Do you go to My Lady Charlotina's, moody Werther?' asked the Iron Orchid.

'Doubtless to be insulted again by her, but, yes, I go,' he confirmed. 'I suppose you have seen the newcomers already?'

'Newcomers?' The light breeze curled the duke's feathers around his face. 'From space?'

'Who knows? They are humanoid. My Lady Charlotina has endomed them, near Lake Billy the Kid. Her whole party has gone to watch. I will see you there, then?'

'You shall, sorrowing son of Nature,' promised the Iron Orchid.

Werther was pleased with the appellation. He swept on. The spaceship turned to follow him.

Soon they saw the stretch of blue water which was My Lady Charlotina's home, the presence of her vast subaquatic palace marked only by a slight disturbance of the surface of the water in the middle of the lake where the energy-tube made its exit. They rose higher into the air, over the surrounding mountains, and at length saw the shimmering, green-tinted air indicating a force-dome. Descending, they saw that the dome, all-but invisible, was surrounded by a large throng of people. They landed in the vicinity of a number of other air-carriages of assorted designs and disembarked.

My Lady Charlotina, naked, with her skin coloured in alternate bands of black and white, saw them. She already had her arm through Werther's. 'Come and see what I have netted for my menagerie,' she called. 'Time travellers. I have never seen so many at once.' She laughed. 'Brannart, of course, takes a very gloomy view, but I'm delighted! There isn't another set like it!'

Brannart Morphail, still in the traditional hump-back and club-foot of the scientist, limped towards them. He shook a bony finger at the Iron Orchid. 'This is all your son's fault. And where is Lord Jagged to explain himself?'

'We have not seen him since our return,' she said. 'You fret so, Brannart. Think how entertaining life has become of late!'

'Not for long, delicate metal, fragile flower. Not for long.' Grumbling to himself, he hobbled past them. 'I must get my instruments.'

They made their way through the gathering until they reached the wall of the force-dome. The Iron Orchid put her hand to her lips in astonishment. 'Are they intelligent?'

'Oh, yes. Primitive, naturally, but otherwise . . .' My Lady Charlotina smiled. 'They growl and rave so! We have not yet had a proper talk with them.'

Orange fire splashed against the inner wall and spread across it, obscuring the scene within.

'They keep doing that,' explained My Lady Charlotina. 'I am not sure if they mean to burn us or the wall. A translator is in operation, though they are still a trifle incoherent. Their voices can be very loud.'

As the fire dissipated, the Iron Orchid stared curiously at the twenty or thirty men inside the dome. Their faces were bruised, bleeding and smudged with oil; they wore identical costumes of mottled green and brown; there were metal helmets on their heads, and what she supposed to be some sort of breathing apparatus (unused) on their backs. In their hands were artifacts consisting basically of a metal tube to which was fixed a handle probably of plastic. It was from these tubes that the flames occasionally gouted.

'They look tired,' she said sympathetically. 'Their journey must have been difficult. Where are they from?'

'They were not clear. We put the dome up because they seemed ill at ease in the open; they kept burning things. Four of my guests had to be taken away for resurrection. I think

they must calm down eventually, don't you, Duke of Queens?'

'They invariably do,' he agreed. 'They'll exhaust themselves, I suppose.'

'So many!' murmured Bishop Castle. He fingered the lobe of his ear.

'That is what makes them such a catch,' said the Duke of Queens. 'Well, Werther, you are an expert – what period would you say they were from?'

'Very early. The twentieth century?'

'A little later?' suggested Bishop Castle.

'The twenty-fifth, then.'

Bishop Castle nodded. 'That seems right. Are any of your guests, My Lady Charlotina, from that age?'

'Not really. You know how few we get from those Dawn Age periods.'

Mistress Christia approached, her eyes wide, her lips wet. 'What *brutes*!' she gasped. 'Oh, I envy you, My Lady Charlotina. When did you find them?'

'Not long ago. But I've no idea how much time they've been here.'

More fire spread itself over the wall, but it seemed fainter. One of the time-travellers flung down his tube, growling and glaring. Some of the audience applauded.

'If only Jherek were here,' said the Iron Orchid. 'He understands these people so well! Where is their machine?'

'That's the odd thing, Brannart has been unable to find a trace of one. He insists that one exists. He thinks that it might have returned to its period of origin – that sometimes happens, I gather. But he says that no machine registered on his detectors and it has caused him to become even more bad-tempered than usual.' My Lady Charlotina withdrew her arm from Werther's. 'Ah, Gaf the Horse in Tears, have you seen my new time-travellers, yet?'

Gaf lifted his skirts. 'Have you seen my new wheels, My Lady Charlotina?'

They wandered away together.

Bishop Castle was trying to address one of the nearest of the time-travellers. 'How do you do?' he began politely. 'Welcome to the End of Time!'

The time-travellers said something to him which defeated the normally subtle translator.

'Where are you from?' asked the Iron Orchid of one.

Another of the time-travellers shouted to the man

addressed. 'Remember, trooper. Name, rank and serial-number. It's all you have to tell 'em.'

'Sarge, they must know we're from Earth.'

'Okay,' assented the other, 'you can tell 'em that, too.'

'Kevin O'Dwyer,' said the first man, 'Trooper First Class. 0008859376.' He added: 'From Earth.'

'What year?' asked the Duke of Queens.

Trooper First Class Kevin O'Dwyer looked pleadingly at his sergeant. 'You're the ranking officer, sir. I shouldn't have to do this.'

'Let them do the talking,' snapped the sergeant. 'We'll do the fighting.'

'Fighting?' The Duke of Queens grinned with pleasure. 'Ah, you'll be able to help me. Are you soldiers, then?'

Again the translation was muddy.

'Soldiers?' asked Bishop Castle, in case they had not heard properly.

The sergeant sighed. 'What do you think, buddy?'

'This is splendid!' said the Duke of Queens.

5

In Which the Duke of Queens Seeks Instruction

As soon as it was evident that the soldiers had used up all their fire, My Lady Charlotina released the one called 'sergeant' whose full name, on further enquiry, turned out to be Sergeant Henry Martinez, 0008832942. After listening in silence to their questions for a while he said:

'Look, I don't know what planet this is, or if you think you're fooling me with your disguise, but you're wasting your time. We're hip to every trick in the Alpha Centauran book.'

'Who are the Alpha Centaurans?' asked My Lady Charlotina, turning to Werther de Goethe.

'They existed even before the Dawn Age,' he explained. 'They were intelligent horses of some kind.'

'Very funny,' said Sergeant Martinez flatly. 'You know damn well who you are.'

'He thinks we're horses? Perhaps some optical disturbance, coupled with . . .' Bishop Castle creased his brow.

'Stow it, will you?' asked the sergeant firmly. 'We're prisoners of war. Now I know you guys don't pay too much

attention to things like the Geneva convention in Alpha Centauri, for all you . . .'

'It's a star system!' said Werther. 'I remember. I think it was used for something a long while ago. It doesn't exist any more, but there was a war between Earth and this other system in the 24th century – you are 24th century, I take it, sir? – which went on for many years. These are typical warriors of the period. The Alpha Centaurans were, I thought, bird-like creatures . . .'

'The Vultures,' supplied Sergeant Martinez. 'That's what we call you.'

'I assure you, we're as human as you are, sergeant,' said My Lady Charlotina. 'You are an ancestor of ours. Don't you recognise the planet? And we have some of your near-contemporaries with us. Li Pao? Where's Li Pao? He's from the 27th.' But the puritanical Chinaman had not yet arrived.

'If I'm not mistaken,' said Martinez patiently, 'you're trying to convince me that the blast which got us out there beyond Mercury sent us into the future. Well, it's a good try – we'd heard your interrogation methods were pretty subtle and pretty damn elaborate – but it's too fancy to work. Save your time. Put us in the camp, knock us off, or do whatever you normally do with prisoners. We're Troopers and we're too tough and too tired to play this kind of fool game. Besides, I can tell you for nothing, we don't know nothing – we get sent on missions. We do what we're told. We either succeed, or we die or, sometimes, we get captured. We got captured. That's what *we* know. There's nothing else we can tell you.'

Fascinated, the Iron Orchid and her friends listened attentively and were regretful when he stopped. He sighed. 'Bad Sugar!' he exclaimed. 'You're like kids, ain't you? Can you understand what I'm saying?'

'Not entirely,' Bishop Castle told him, 'but it's very interesting for us. To study you, you know.'

Muttering, Sergeant Martinez sat down on the ground.

'Aren't you going to say any more?' Mistress Christia was extremely disappointed. 'Would you like to make love to me, Sergeant Martinez?'

He offered her an expression of cynical contempt. 'We're up to that one, too,' he said.

She brightened, holding out her hand. 'Wonderful! You don't mind, do you, My Lady Charlotina?'

'Of course not.'

When Sergeant Martinez did not accept her hand, Mistress Christia sat down beside him and stroked his cropped head.

Firmly, he replaced the helmet he had been holding in his hands. Then he folded his arms across his broad chest and stared into the middle-distance. His colour seemed to have changed. Mistress Christia stroked his arm. He jerked it away.

'I must have misunderstood you,' she said.

'I can take it or leave it alone,' he told her. 'You got it? Okay, I'll take it. When I want it. But if you expect to get any information from me that way, that's where you're wrong.'

'Perhaps you'd rather do it in private?'

A mirthless grin appeared on his battered features. 'Well, I sure ain't gonna do it out here, in front of all your friends, am I?'

'Oh, I see,' she said, confused. 'You must forgive me if I seem tactless, but it's so long since I entertained a time-traveller. We'll leave it for a bit, then.'

The Iron Orchid saw that some of the men inside the force dome had stretched out on the ground and had shut their eyes. 'They probably need to rest,' she suggested, 'and to eat something. Shouldn't we feed them, My Lady Charlotina?'

'I'll transfer them to my menagerie,' agreed her hostess. 'They'll probably be more at ease there. Meanwhile, we can continue with the party.'

Some time went by; the world continued in pretty much its normal fashion, with parties, experiments, games and inventions. Eventually, so the Iron Orchid heard when she emerged from a particularly dull and enjoyable affair with Bishop Castle, the soldiers from the 24th century had become convinced that they had travelled into the future, but were not much reconciled. Some, it seemed, were claiming that they would rather have been captured by their enemies. No news came from Lord Shark and the Duke of Queens had sent two or three messages to him which had not been answered. Jherek Carnelian did not come back and Lord Jagged of Canaria refused all visitors. Brannart Morphail bewailed the inconsistencies which he claimed had appeared in the fabric of Time. Korghon of Soth created a sentient kind of mould which he trained to do tricks, Mis-

tress Christia, having listened to an old tape, became obsessed with learning the language of the flowers and spent hour after hour listening to them, speaking to them in simple words, O'Kala Incarnadine became a sea-lion and thereafter could not be found. The craze for 'Cities' and 'Continents' died and nothing replaced it. Visiting the Duke of Queens, the Iron Orchid mentioned this and he revealed his growing impatience with Lord Shark. 'He promised he would send me an instructor. I have had to fall back on Trooper O'Dwyer, who knows a little about knives, but nothing at all about swords. This is the perfect moment for a new fashion. Lord Shark has let me down.'

Trooper O'Dwyer, esconced in luxury at the duke's palace, had agreed to assist the duke, his sergeant having succumbed at last to the irresistible charms of Mistress Christia, but the duke confided to the Iron Orchid that he was not at all sure if bayonet drill were the same as fencing.

'However,' he told her, 'I am getting the first principles. You decide, to start, that you are superior to someone else – that is that you have more of these primitive attributes than the other person or persons – love, hate, greed, generosity and so on . . .'

'Are not some of these opposites?' Her conversations with her son had told her that much.

'They are . . .'

'And you claim you have all of them?'

'*More* of them than someone else.'

'I see. Go on.'

'Patriotism is difficult. With that you identify yourself with a whole country. The trick is to see that country as yourself so that any attack on the country is an attack on you.'

'A bit like Werther's Nature?'

'Exactly. Patriotism, in Trooper O'Dwyer's case, can extend to the entire planet.'

'Something of a feat!'

'He accomplishes it easily. So do his companions. Well, armed with all these emotions and conceptions you begin a conflict – either by convincing yourself that you have been insulted by someone (who often has something you desire to own) or by goading him to believe that he has been insulted by you (there are subtle variations, but I do not thoroughly understand them, as yet). You then try to kill that person – or that nation – or that planet – or as many members as

possible. That is what Trooper O'Dwyer and the rest are currently attempting with Alpha Centauri.'

'They will succeed, according to Werther. But I understand that the rules do not allow resurrection.'

'They are *unable* to accomplish the trick, most delectable of blossoms, most marvellous of metals.'

'So the deaths are permanent?'

'Quite.'

'How odd.'

'They had much higher populations in those days.'

'I suppose that must explain it.'

'Yet, it appears, every time one of their members was killed, they grieved – a most unpleasant sensation, I gather. To rid themselves of this sense of grief, they killed more of the opposing forces, creating grief in them so that they would wish to kill more – and so on, and so on.'

'It all seems rather – well – unaesthetic.'

'I agree. But we must not dismiss their arts out of hand. One does not always come immediately to terms with the principles involved.'

'Is it even art?'

'They describe it as such. They use the very word.'

One eyebrow expressed her astonishment. She turned as Trooper O'Dwyer shuffled into the room. He was eating a piece of brightly coloured fruit and he had an oddly shaped girl on his arm (created, whispered the duke, to the trooper's exact specifications). He nodded at them. 'Duke,' he said. 'Lady.' His stomach had grown so that it hung over his belt. He wore the same clothes he had arrived in, but his wounds had healed and he no longer had the respiratory gear on his back.

'Shall we go to the – um – "gym", Trooper O'Dwyer?' asked the duke in what was, in the Iron Orchid's opinion, a rather unnecessarily agreeable tone.

'Sure.'

'You must come and see this,' he told her.

The 'gym' was a large, bare room, designed by Trooper O'Dwyer, hung with various ropes, furnished with pieces of equipment whose function was, to her, unfathomable. For a while she watched as, enthusiastically, the Duke of Queens leapt wildly about, swinging from ropes, attacking large, stuffed objects with sharp sticks, yelling at the top of his voice, while, seated in a comfortable chair with the girl beside him, Trooper O'Dwyer called out guttural words in

an alien tongue. The Iron Orchid did her best to be amused, to encourage the duke, but she found it difficult. She was glad when she saw someone enter the hall by the far door. She went to greet the newcomer. 'Dear Lord Shark,' she said, 'the duke has been so looking forward to your visit.'

The figure in the shark-mask stopped dead, pausing for a moment or two before replying.

'I am not Lord Shark. I am his fencing automaton, programmed to teach the Duke of Queens the secrets of the duel.'

'I am very pleased you have come,' she said in genuine relief.

6

Old Fashioned Amusements

Sergeant Martinez and his twenty-five troopers relaxed in the comparative luxury of a perfect reproduction of a partially ruined Martian bunker, created for them by My Lady Charlotina. It was better than they had expected, so they had not complained, particularly since few of them had spent much of their time in the menagerie.

'The point is,' Sergeant Martinez was saying, as he took a long toke on the large black Herodian cigar, 'that we're all going soft and we're forgetting our duty.'

'The war's over, sarge,' Trooper Gan Hok reminded him. He grinned. 'By a couple of million years or so. Alpha Centauri's beaten.'

'That's what they're telling us,' said the sergeant darkly. 'And maybe they're right. But what if this *was* all a mirage we're in? An illusion created by the Vultures to make us *think* the war's over, so we make no attempt to escape.'

'You don't really believe that, do you, sarge?' enquired squat Trooper Pleckhanov. 'Nobody could make an illusion this good. Could they?'

'Probably not, trooper, but it's our duty to *assume* they could and get back to our own time.'

'That girl of yours dropped you, sarge?' enquired Trooper Denereaz, with the perspicacity for which he was loathed throughout the squad. Some of the others began to laugh, but stopped themselves as they noted the expression on the sergeant's face.

'Have you got a plan, sarge?' asked Trooper George

diplomatically. 'Wouldn't we need a time machine?'

'They exist. You've all talked with that Morphail guy.'

'Right. But would he give us one.'

'He refuses,' Sergeant Martinez told them. 'What does that suggest to you, Trooper Denereaz?'

'That they want us to remain here?' suggested Denereaz dutifully.

'Right.'

'Then how are we going to get hold of one, sarge?' asked Trooper Gan Hok.

'We got to use our brains,' he said sluggishly, staring hard at his cigar. 'We got one chance of a successful bust-out. We're gonna need some hardware, hostages maybe.' He yawned and slowly began to describe his scheme in broad outline while his men listened with different degrees of attention. Some of them were not at all happy with the sergeant's reminder of their duty.

Trooper O'Dwyer had not been present at the conference, but remained at the palace of the Duke of Queens where he had become very comfortable. Occasionally he would stroll into the gym to see how the duke's fencing lessons were progressing. He was fascinated by the robot instructing the duke; it was programmed to respond to certain key commands, but within those terms could respond with rapid and subtle reflexes, while at the same time giving a commentary on the duke's proficiency, which currently afforded Trooper O'Dwyer some easy amusement.

The words Lord Shark used in his programming were in the ancient language of Fransai; authentic and romantic (though the romance had certainly escaped Lord Shark). To begin a duel the Duke of Queens would cry:

'En tou rage!'

— and if struck (the robot was currently set not to wound) he would retort gracefully:

'Toujours gai, mon coeur!'

Trooper O'Dwyer thought that he had noted an improvement in the duke's skill over the past week or so (not that weeks, as such, existed in this world and he was having a hard time keeping track of days, let alone anything else) thanks, thought the trooper, to the original basic training. A good part of the duke's time was spent with the robot and he had lost interest in all other activities, all relationships, including that with Trooper O'Dwyer, who was content to

remain at the palace, for he was given everything his heart desired.

A month or two passed (by Trooper O'Dwyer's reckoning) and the Duke of Queens grew increasingly skilful, more often now he cried 'En tou rage!' than 'Toujours gai!', and he confided, pantingly, one morning to the trooper that he felt he was almost ready to meet Lord Shark.

'You reckon you're as good as this other guy?' asked O'Dwyer.

'The automaton has taught me all it can. Soon I shall pay a visit on Lord Shark and display what I have learned.'

'I wouldn't mind getting a gander at Lord Shark myself,' said Trooper O'Dwyer, casually enough.

'Accompany me, by all means.'

'Okay, duke.' Trooper O'Dwyer winked and nudged the duke in the ribs. 'It'll break the monotony. Get me?'

The Duke of Queens, removing his fencing mask (fashioned in gold filigree to resemble a fanciful fox) blinked, but made no answer. O'Dwyer could be interestingly cryptic sometimes, he thought. He noticed that the automaton was still poised in the ready position and he commanded it to come to attention. It did, its sword pointing upwards and almost touching its fishy snout.

The duke drew O'Dwyer's attention to his new muscles. 'I had nothing to do with their appearance,' he said in delight. 'They came – quite naturally. It was most surprising!'

The trooper nodded and bit into a fruit, reflecting that the duke now seemed to be in better shape than he was.

The Iron Orchid and My Lady Charlotina lay back upon the cushions of their slowly moving air-carriage which had been designed in the likeness of the long-extinct gryphon and wondered where they might be. They had been making languid love. Eventually, My Lady Charlotina put her golden head over the edge of the gryphon's back and saw, not far off, the Duke of Queens' inverted palace. She suggested to her friend that they might visit the duke; the Iron Orchid agreed. They adjusted their gravity rings and flew towards the top-most (or the lowest) door, leaving the gryphon behind.

'You seem unenthusiastic, my dear,' murmured My Lady Charlotina, 'about the duke's current activities.'

'I suppose I am,' assented the Iron Orchid, brightening

her silver skin a touch. 'He has such hopes of beginning a fashion.'

'And you think he will fail? I am quite looking forward to the – what is it – the fight?'

'The duel,' she said.

'And many others I know await it eagerly.' They floated down a long, curling passage whose walls were inset at regular intervals with cages containing pretty song-children. 'When is it to take place, do you know?'

'We must ask the duke. I gather he practises wholeheartedly with the automaton Lord Shark sent him.'

'Lord Shark is so mysterious, is he not,' whispered My Lady Charlotina with relish. 'I suspect that the interest in the duel comes, as much as anything, from people's wish to inspect one so rarely seen in society. Is duelling his *only* pastime?'

'I know nothing at all of Lord Shark the Unknown, save that he affects a surly manner and that he is pleased to assume the role of a recluse. Ah, there is the "gym". Probably we shall find the Duke of Queens therein.'

They came upon the duke as he divested himself of the last of his duelling costume.

'How handsome your body is, manly master of Queens,' purred My Lady Charlotina. 'Have you altered it recently?'

He kissed her hand. 'It changed itself – a result of all my recent exercise.' He inspected it with pleasure. 'It is how they used to change their bodies, in the old days.'

'We wondered when your duel with Lord Shark the Unknown was to take place,' she said, 'and came to ask. Everyone is anxious to watch.'

He was flattered. 'I go today to visit Lord Shark. It is for him to name the time and the location.' The duke indicated Trooper O'Dwyer who lay half-hidden upon an ermine couch. 'Trooper O'Dwyer accompanies me. Would you care to come, too?'

'It is my understanding that Lord Shark does not encourage visitors,' said the Iron Orchid.

'You think you would not be welcome, then?'

'It is best to assume that.'

'Thank you, Iron Orchid, for saving me once again from a lapse of manners. I was ever tactless.' He smiled. 'It was that which led to this situation, really.'

'Trooper O'Dwyer!' My Lady Charlotina drifted towards

the reclining warrior. 'Have you seen anything of your compatriots of late?'

'Nope. Have they gone missing?' He showed no great interest in his one-time mess-mates.

'They appear to have vanished, taking with them some power-rings and a large air-carriage I had given them for their own use. They have deserted my menagerie.'

'I guess they'll come back when they feel like it.'

'I do hope so. If they were not happy with their habitat they had only to tell me. Well,' turning with a smile to the duke, 'we shall not keep you. I hope your encounter with Lord Shark is satisfactory today. And you must tell us, at once, if you agree place and time, so that we can tell everyone to make plans to be there.'

He bowed. 'You will be the first, My Lady Charlotina, Iron Orchid.'

'Is that your "sword"?'

'It is.'

She stroked the slender blade. 'I must get one for myself,' she said, 'and then you can teach me, too.'

As they returned to their gryphon, the Iron Orchid touched her friend's arm. 'You could not have said a more pleasing thing to him.'

My Lady Charlotina laughed. 'Oh, we live to indulge such honest souls as he. Do we not, Iron Orchid?'

'Do I detect a slightly archaic note in your choice of phrase?'

'You do, my dear. I have been studying, too, you see!'

7

The Terms of the Duel

Lord Shark's warning devices appraised him of the approach of an air car, and his screens revealed the nature of that car, a large kite-like contraption from which hung a gondola – in the gondola, two figures.

'Two,' murmured Lord Shark the Unknown to himself. Beneath his mask, he frowned. The car drifted closer and was seen to contain the Duke of Queens and a plump individual in poorly fitting overalls of some description.

He instructed his automata, his servants, to admit the

couple when they reached the building, then he sat back to wait.

Lord Shark's grey mind considered the information on the screens, but dismissed the questions raised until the Duke of Queens could supply answers. He hoped that the duke had come to admit himself incapable of learning the skills of the duel and that he need not, therefore, be further bothered by the business which threatened to interrupt the routines of all the dull centuries of his existence. The only person on his planet who had not heard the news that the universe was coming to an end, he was the only one who would have been consoled by the knowledge or, indeed, even interested, for nobody else had paid it too much attention, save perhaps Lord Jagged of Canaria. Yet, even had Lord Shark known, he would still have preferred to have awaited the end by following his conventional pursuits and was too much of a cynic to have believed the news until it had been confirmed by the event itself.

He heard footfalls in the passage. He counted thirty-four before they reached his door. He touched a stud. The door opened and there stood the Duke of Queens, in feathered finery, and lace, and gold, bowing with elaborate and meaningless courtesy.

'Lord Shark, I am here to receive your instructions!' He straightened, stroking his large black beard and looking about the room with a curiosity Lord Shark found offensive.

'This other? Is he your second?'

'Trooper O'Dwyer.'

'Of the 46th Star Squadron,' said Trooper O'Dwyer by way of embellishment. 'Nice to know you, Lord Shark.'

Lord Shark's small sigh was not heard by his visitors as he rose from behind his consoles. 'We shall talk in the gunroom,' he said. 'This way.'

He led them along a perfectly straight corridor into a perfectly straight room which was lined with all the weapons his long-dead companion had collected in his life-time.

'Phew!' said Trooper O'Dwyer. 'What an armoury!' He reached out and took down a heavy energy-rifle. 'I've seen these. We were hoping for an allocation.' He operated the moving parts, he sighted down the barrel. 'Is it charged?'

Lord Shark said tonelessly: 'I believe that they are all in working condition.' While Trooper O'Dwyer whistled and enthused, Lord Shark drew the Duke of Queens to the far end of the room where stood a rack of swords. 'If you feel

that you wish to withdraw from our agreement, my lord duke, I should like you to know that I would also be perfectly happy to forget—'

'No, no! May I?' The Duke of Queens wrapped his heavy cloak over his arm and selected an ancient sabre from the rack, flexing it and testing it for balance. 'Excellent!' He smiled. 'You see, Lord Shark, that I know my blades now! I am ready to meet you at any time, anywhere you decide. Your automaton proved an excellent instructor and can best me no longer. I am ready. Besides,' he added, 'it would not do to call off the duel. So many of my friends intend to watch. They would be disappointed.'

'Friends? Come to watch?' Lord Shark was in despair. The Duke of Queens was renowned for his vulgarity, but Lord Shark had not for a moment considered that he would turn such an event into a sideshow.

'So if you will name when and where . . .' The Duke of Queens replaced the sword in the rack.

'Very well. It might as easily be where we first met, on the plain, as anywhere.'

'Good. Good.'

'As to time – say a week from today?'

'A *week*? I know the expression. Let me think . . .'

'Seven days – seven rotations of the planet around the sun.'

'Ah, yes . . .' The duke still seemed vague, so Lord Shark said impatiently:

'I will make you the loan of one of my chronometers. I will set it to indicate when you should leave to arrive at the appropriate time.'

'You are generous, Lord Shark.'

Lord Shark turned away. 'I will be glad when this is over,' he said. He glared at Trooper O'Dwyer, but the trooper was oblivious to his displeasure. He was now inspecting another weapon.

'I'd sure love the chance of trying one of these babies out,' he hinted.

Lord Shark ignored him.

'We shall fight, Duke of Queens, until one of us is killed. Does that suit you?'

'Certainly. It is what I expected.'

'You are not reluctant to die? I assumed . . .'

'I've died more than once, you know,' said the duke airily. 'The resurrection is sometimes a little disorientating, but it doesn't take long to—'

'I shall not expect to be resurrected,' Lord Shark told him firmly. 'I intend to make that one of the terms of this duel. If killed – then it is final.'

'You are serious, sir?' The Duke of Queens was surprised.

'It is my nature to be ever serious, Duke of Queens.'

The Duke of Queens considered for a moment, stroking his beard. 'You would be annoyed with me if I did see to it that you were resurrected?'

'I would consider it extremely bad-mannered, sir.'

The duke was conscious of his reputation for vulgarity. 'Then, of course, I must agree.'

'You may still withdraw.'

'No. I stand by your terms, Lord Shark. Absolutely.'

'You will accept the same terms for yourself, if I kill you?'

'Oh!'

'You will accept the same terms, sir?'

'To remain dead?'

Lord Shark was silent.

Then the Duke of Queens laughed. 'Why not? Think of the entertainment it will provide for our friends!'

'*Your* friends,' said Lord Shark the Unknown pointedly.

'Yes. It will give the duel an authentic flavour. And there would be no question that I would not have created a genuine stir, eh? Though, of course, I would not be in a position to enjoy my success.'

'I gather, then,' said Lord Shark in a peculiar voice, 'that you are willing to die for the sake of this frivolity?'

'I am, sir. Though "frivolity" is hardly the word. It is, at very least, an enjoyable jest – at best an act of original artistry. And that, I confide to you, Lord Shark, is what it has always been my ambition to achieve.'

'Then we are agreed. There is no more to say. Would you choose a sword?'

'I'll leave that to you, sir, for I respect your judgement better than my own. If I might continue to borrow your automaton until the appointed time . . .?'

'Of course.'

'Until then.' The Duke of Queens bowed. 'O'Dwyer?'

The trooper looked up from a gun he had partially dismantled. 'Duke?'

'We can leave now.'

Reluctantly, but with expert swiftness, Trooper O'Dwyer re-assembled the weapon, cheerfully saluted Lord Shark and, as he left, said: 'I'd like to come back and have another look at these sometime.'

Lord Shark ignored him. Trooper O'Dwyer shrugged and followed the Duke of Queens from the room.

Watching the great kite float into the distance, Lord Shark a little later tried to debate with himself the mysteries of the temperament the Duke of Queens had revealed, but an answer was beyond him; he merely found himself confirmed in his opinion of the stupidity of the whole cosmos. It would do no great harm, he thought, to extinguish one small manifestation of that stupidity: the Duke of Queens certainly embodied everything Lord Shark most loathed about his world. And, if he himself, instead, were slain, then that would be an even greater consolation – though he believed the likelihood was remote.

Matters of Honour

Not long after the exchange between the Duke of Queens and Lord Shark, Trooper Kevin O'Dwyer, becoming conscious of his own lack of exercise, waddled out for a stroll in the sweet-smell forest which lay to the west of the duke's palace.

Trooper O'Dwyer was concerned for the duke's safety. It had only just dawned on him what the stakes were to be. He took a kindly and patronising interest in the well-being of the Duke of Queens, regarding his host with the affection one might feel towards a large, stupid labrador, an amiable labrador. This was perhaps a naïve view of the duke's character, but it suited the good-natured O'Dwyer to maintain it. Thus, he mulled the problem over as he sat down under a gigantic daffodil and rested a pair of legs which had become unused to walking.

The scent of the monstrous flowers was very heady and it made the already weary Trooper O'Dwyer rather drowsy, so that he had not accomplished very much thinking before he began to nod off and would have fallen into a deep sleep had he not been tapped smartly on the shoulder. With a grunt he opened his eyes and looked into the gaunt features of his old comrade, Trooper Gan Hok. With a gesture, Trooper Gan Hok cautioned O'Dwyer to silence, whispering: 'Is anyone else with you?'

'Only you.' Trooper O'Dwyer was pleased with his wit. He grinned.

'This is serious,' said Trooper Gan Hok, wriggling the rest of his thin body from the undergrowth. 'We've been trying to contact you for days. We're busting off. Sergeant Martinez sent me to find you. Didn't you know we'd escaped?'

'I heard you'd disappeared, but I didn't think much of it. Has something come up?'

'Nothing special, only we decided it was our duty to try to get back. Sergeant Martinez reckons that we're as good as deserters.'

'I thought we were as good as PoWs?' said O'Dwyer reasonably. 'We can't get back. We've been told.'

'Sergeant Martinez doesn't believe 'em.'

'Well,' said O'Dwyer, 'I do. Don't you?'

'That's not the point, trooper,' said Gan Hok primly. 'Anyway, it's time to rejoin your squad. I've come to take you back to our HQ. We've got a foxhole on the other side of this jungle, but time's running out, and so are our supplies. We couldn't work the power rings. We need food and we need weapons before we can put the rest of the sergeant's plan into operation.'

Through one of the gaps in his shirt, Trooper O'Dwyer scratched his stomach. 'It sounds crazy. What's your opinion? Is Martinez in his right mind?'

'He's in command. That's all we have to know.'

Before he had become a guest of the Duke of Queens, Trooper O'Dwyer would have accepted this logic, but now he was not sure he found it palatable. 'Tell the sergeant I've decided to stay. Okay?'

'That *is* desertion. Look at you – you've been corrupted by the enemy!'

'They're not the enemy, they're our descendants.'

'And they wouldn't exist today if we hadn't done our duty and wiped out the Vultures – that's assuming what they say is true.' Gan Hok's voice took on the hysterical tones of the very hungry. 'If you don't come, you'll be treated as a deserter.' Meaningly, Trooper Gan Hok fingered the knife at his belt.

O'Dwyer considered his position and then replied. 'Okay, I'll come with you. There isn't a chance of this plan working, anyhow.'

'The Sergeant's got it figured, O'Dwyer. There's a good chance.'

With a sigh, Trooper O'Dwyer got to his feet and lumbered after Trooper Gan Hok as he moved with nervous stealth back into the forest.

'But, dearest of dukes, you cannot take such terms seriously!' The Iron Orchid's skin flickered through an entire spectrum of colour as, in agitation, she paced the floor of the 'gym'.

Embarrassed, he fingered the cloak of the dormant duelling automaton. 'I have agreed,' he said quietly. 'I thought you would find it amusing – you, in particular, my petalled pride.'

'I believe,' she replied, 'that I feel sad.'

'You must tell Werther. He will be curious. It is the emotion he most yearns to experience.'

'I would miss your company so much, if Lord Shark kills you. And kill you he will, I am sure.'

'Nonsense. I am the match for his automaton, am I not?'

'Who knows how Lord Shark programmed the beast? He could be deceiving you.'

'Why should he? Like you, he tried to dissuade me from the duel.'

'It might be a trick.'

'Lord Shark is incapable of trickery. It is not in his nature to be devious.'

'What do you know of his nature? What do any of us know?'

'True. But I have my instincts.'

The Iron Orchid had a low opinion of those.

'If you wait,' he said consolingly, 'you will observe my skill. The automaton is programmed to respond to certain verbal commands. I intend, now, to allow it to try to wound me.' He turned, presented his sword at the ready and said to the automaton: 'We fight to wound.' Immediately the mechanical duellist prepared itself, balancing itself on the balls of its feet in readiness for the duke's attack.

'Forgive me,' said the Iron Orchid coldly, 'if I do not watch. Farewell, Duke of Queens.'

He was baffled by her manner. 'Goodbye, lovely Iron Orchid.' His sword touched the automaton's; the automaton feinted; the duke parried. The Iron Orchid fled from the hall.

Righting herself at the exit, she entered her little air car, the bird of paradise, and instructed it to carry her as rapidly as possible to the house of Lord Shark the Unknown. The car obeyed, flying over many partially built and partially destroyed scenes, several of them the duke's own, of mountains, luscious sunrises, cities, landscapes of all descriptions, until the barren plain came in sight and beyond it the brown mountains, under the shadow of which lay Lord Shark's featureless dwelling.

The bird of paradise descended completely to the ground, its scintillating feathers brushing the dust; out of it climbed the Iron Orchid, who walked determinedly to the door and knocked upon it.

A masked figure opened it immediately.

'Lord Shark, I have come to beg—'

'I am not Lord Shark,' said the figure in Lord Shark's voice. 'I am his servant. My master is in his duelling room. Is your business important?'

'It is.'

'Then I shall inform him of your presence.' The machine closed the door.

Impatient and astonished, for she had had no real experience of such behaviour, the Iron Orchid waited until, in a while, the door was opened again.

'Lord Shark will receive you,' the automaton told her. 'Follow me.'

She followed, remarking to herself on the unaesthetic symmetry of the interior. She was shown into a room furnished with a chair, a bench and a variety of ugly devices which she took to be crude machines. On one side of her stood Lord Shark the Unknown, a sword still in his gloved hand.

'You are the Iron Orchid?'

'You remember that we met when you challenged my friend the Duke of Queens?'

'I remember. But I did not challenge him. He asked how he might make amends for destroying the lichen I had been growing. He built his continent upon it.'

'His Afrique.'

'I do not know what he called it. I suggested a duel, because I wished to test my abilities against those of another mortal. I regretted this suggestion when I understood the light in which the duke accepted it.'

'Then you would rather not continue with it?'

'It does not please me, madam, to be a clown, to be put to use for the entertainment of those foolish and capricious individuals you call your friends!'

'I do not understand you.'

'Doubtless you do not.'

'I regret, however, that you are displeased.'

'Why should you regret that?' He seemed genuinely puzzled. 'I regret only that my privacy has been disturbed. You are the *third* to visit me.'

'You have only to refuse to fight and you are saved from enduring that which disturbs you.'

The shark-mask looked away from her. 'I must kill your Duke of Queens, as an example to the rest of you – as an example of the futility of all existence, particularly yours. If

he should kill me, then I am satisfied, also. There is a question of honour involved.'

'Honour? What is that?'

'Your ignorance confirms my point.'

'So you intend to pursue this silly adventure to the bitter end?'

'Call it what you like.'

'The duke's motives are not yours.'

'His motives do not interest me.'

'The duke loves life. You hate it.'

'Then he can withdraw.'

'But you will not?'

'You have presented no arguments to convince me that I should.'

'But he seeks only to please his fellows. He agreed to the duel because he hoped it would please you.'

'Then he deserves death.'

'You are unkind, Lord Shark.'

'I am a man of intellect, madam, whose misfortune it is to find himself alone in an irrational universe. I do you all the credit of having the ability to see what I see, but I despise you for your unwillingness to accept the truth.'

'You see only one form of truth.'

'There *is* only one form of truth.' His grey shoulders shrugged. 'I see, too, that your reasons for visiting me were whimsical, after all. I would be grateful if you would leave.'

As she turned to go, something mechanical screamed from the desk. She paused. With a murmur of displeasure, Lord Shark the Unknown hurried to his consoles.

'This is intolerable!' he stared into a screen. 'A horde has arrived! When you leave, please ask them to go away.'

She craned her neck to look at the screen. 'Why!' she exclaimed. 'It is My Lady Charlotina's missing time-travellers. What could their reason be, Lord Shark, for visiting you?'

9

Questions of Power

Brannart Morphail was not in a good temper. The scientist gesticulated at My Lady Charlotina, who had come to see him in his laboratories, which were attached to her own

apartments at Below the Lake. 'Another Time Machine? Why should I waste one? I have so few left!'

'Surely you have one which you like less than the others?' she [illegible]

'Big enough to take twenty five men? It is impossible!'

'But they are so destructive!'

'What serious harm can they do if their demands are simply ignored?'

'The Iron Orchid and Lord Shark are their prisoners. They have all those weapons of Lord Shark's. They have already destroyed the mountains in a most dramatic way.'

'I enjoyed the spectacle.'

'So did I, dear Brannart.'

'And if they destroy the Iron Orchid and Lord Shark, we can easily resurrect them again.'

'They intend to subject them to *pain*, Brannart, and I gather that pain is enjoyable only up to a point. Please agree.'

'The responsibility for those creatures was yours, My Lady Charlotina. You should not have let them wander about, willy-nilly. Now look what has happened. They have invaded Lord Shark's home, captured both Lord Shark and the Iron Orchid (what on earth was she doing there?), seized those silly guns, and are now demanding a Time Machine in which to return to their own age. I have spoken to them already about the Morphail Effect, but they choose not to believe me.' He limped away from her. 'They shall not have a Time Machine.'

'Besides,' said My Lady Charlotina, 'Lord Shark is due, very shortly, to fight his duel with the Duke of Queens. We have all been looking forward to it so much. Think of the disappointment. I know you wanted to watch.'

His hump twitched. 'That's a better reason, I'd agree.' He frowned. 'There might be a solution.'

'Tell me what it is, most sagacious of scientists!'

Sergeant Martinez glared at Lord Shark and the Iron Orchid who, bound firmly, lay propped in a corner of the room. He and his men were armed with the pick of the weapons and they looked much more confident than when they had pushed past the Iron Orchid as she opened the door of Lord Shark's house.

'We don't like to do this,' said Sergeant Martinez, 'but

we're running out of patience. Your friend, Lady Charlotina, is going to get your ear if someone doesn't deliver that time ship soon.'

'Why should she need it?' The Iron Orchid was enjoying herself. Her sense of boredom had lifted completely and she felt that if they continued to be prisoners for a little longer, the duel would have to be forgotten about. She wished, however, that Sergeant Martinez had not taken *all* her power rings from her fingers.

'Tell your robot to get us some more grub,' ordered the sergeant, digging Lord Shark in the ribs with the toe of his boot. Lord Shark complied. He seemed unmoved by what was happening; it rather confirmed his general view of an unreasonable and hostile universe. He felt vindicated.

A screen came to life. Trooper O'Dwyer, looking miserable, tuned the image with a manual control he had been playing with. 'It's the old crippled guy,' he informed his sergeant.

Sergeant Martinez said importantly, 'I'll take over, trooper. Hi,' he addressed Brannart Morphail. 'Have you agreed to give us a ship?'

'One is on its way to you.'

Sergeant Martinez looked pleased with himself. 'Okay. We get the ship and you get the hostages back.'

The Iron Orchid's heart sank. 'Do not give in to them, Brannart!' she cried. 'Let them do their worst!'

'I must warn you,' said Brannart Morphail, 'that it will do you little good. Time refuses paradox. You will not be able to return to your own age – or, at least, not for long. You would do better to forget this whole ridiculous venture . . .'

Sergeant Martinez switched him off.

'See?' he said to Trooper O'Dwyer. 'I told you it would work. Like a dream.'

'They must be treating it as a game,' said O'Dwyer. 'They've got nothing to fear. By using those power rings they could wipe us out in a second.'

Sergeant Martinez looked at the rings he had managed to get onto his little finger. 'I can't figure out why they don't work for me.'

'They are, in essence, biological,' said the Iron Orchid. 'They work only for the individual who owns them, translating their desires much as a hand does – without conscious thought.'

'Well, we'll see about that. What about the robots, will they obey anybody?'

'If so programmed,' said Lord Shark.

'Okay,' (of the automaton which had re-entered with a tray of food), 'tell that one to obey me.'

Lord Shark instructed the robot accordingly. 'You will obey the soldiers,' he said.

'There's some kind of vehicle arrived outside.' O'Dwyer looked up from the screen. He addressed Lord Shark. 'How come this equipment looks like it's out of a museum?'

'My companion,' explained Lord Shark, 'he built it.'

'Funny looking thing. More like a space ship than a time ship.' Trooper Denereaz stared at the image: a long, tubular construction, tapering at both ends, hovering just above the ground.

'It's going to be good to get back amongst the cold, clean stars,' said Sergeant Martinez sentimentally, 'where the only things a man's got to trust is himself and a few buddies, and he knows he's fighting for something important. Maybe you people don't understand that. Maybe there's no need for you *to* understand. But it's because there are men like us, prepared to go out there and get their guts shot out of them in order to keep the universe a safe place to live in, that the rest of you sleep well in your beds at night, dreaming your nice, comfortable dreams . . .'

'Hadn't we better get going, sergeant?' asked Trooper O'Dwyer. 'If we're going.'

'It could be a trap,' said Sergeant Martinez grimly, 'so we'd better go out in groups of five. First five occupies the ship, checks for occupants, booby-traps and so on, then signals to the next five, until we're all out. Trooper O'Dwyer, keep a watch on that screen until you see we're all aboard and nobody's shooting at us, then follow – oh, and bring that robot with you. We can use him.'

'Yes sir.'

'And if there's any smell of a set-up, kill the hostages.'

'Yes sir,' said Trooper O'Dwyer sceptically.

A bell began to ring.

'What does that mean?' demanded Sergeant Martinez.

'It means that I shall be able to keep my appointment with the Duke of Queens,' Lord Shark told him.

10

The Duel

The remains of the Rocky Mountains were still smouldering in the background as, from a safe distance, the crowd watched the ship containing the troopers rise into the air. Behind the crowd, feeling a little upset by the lack of attention, the Duke of Queens stood, sword in hand, awaiting his antagonist. The Duke was early. He had no interest in these other events, which he regarded as an unwelcome interruption, threatening to diffuse the drama of his duel with Lord Shark the Unknown; he thought that Sergeant Martinez and his men had behaved rather badly. Certainly, at any other time, he would have been as diverted by their actions as anyone, but, as it was, they had confused the presentation and robbed it of some of its tension.

At last the duke noticed that heads were beginning to turn in his direction and he heard someone call:

'The Iron Orchid – Lord Shark – they emerge! They are saved!'

There came a chorus of self-conscious exultation.

The ranks parted; now the Iron Orchid, her slender fingers bare of rings, walked with a self-satisfied air beside Lord Shark the Unknown, stiff, sworded and stern.

They confronted each other over a narrow fissure in the earth. The Duke of Queens bowed. Lord Shark the Unknown, after a second's hesitation, bowed.

The Iron Orchid seemed reconciled. She took a step back. 'May the best man win!' she said.

'My lord.' The duke presented his sword. 'To the death!'

Silently, Lord Shark the Unknown replied to the courtesy.

'En tou rage, mon coeur!' The Duke of Queens adopted the traditional stance, balancing on the balls of his feet, his body poised, one hand upon his hip, ready for the lunge. Lord Shark's body fell into the same position as precisely as that of one of his own automata.

The crowd moved forward, but kept its distance.

Lord Shark lunged. The Duke of Queens parried, at the same time leaning back to avoid the point of the blade. Lord Shark continued his forward movement, crossing the fissure, lunged again, was parried again. This time, the Duke of Queens lunged and was parried. For a short while

it was possible for the spectators to follow the stylised movements of the duellists, but gradually, as the combatants familiarised themselves with each other's method of fighting, the speed increased, until it was often impossible to see the thin blades, save for a gleaming blurr as they met, parted, and met again.

Back and forth across the dry, dancing dust of that plain the two men moved, the duke's handsome, heavy features registering every escape, every minor victory, while the immobile mask of Lord Shark the Unknown gave no indication of how that strange, bleak recluse felt when his shoulder was grazed by the duke's blade, or when he came within a fraction of inch of skewering his opponent's rapidly beating heart.

At first some of the crowd would applaud a near-miss or gasp as one of the duellists would turn his body aside from a lunge which seemed unerring; soon, however, they fell silent, realising that they must feel some of the tension the ancients had felt when they attended such games.

The duke, refusing in homage to those same ancestors to allow himself any energy boosts, understood that he was tiring much more than he had tired during his tuition, but he understood, also, that Lord Shark the Unknown had patterned his automata entirely after himself, for Lord Shark fought in exactly the same manner as had his mechanical servant, and this made the Duke of Queens more hopeful. Dimly he became aware of the implications of his bargain with Lord Shark; to die and never to be resurrected, to forego the rich enjoyment of life, to become unconscious forever. His attention wavered as these thoughts crept into his mind, he parried a lunge a little too late. He felt the sharp steel slide into his body. He knew pain. He gasped. Lord Shark the Unknown stepped back as the Duke of Queens staggered.

Lord Shark was expectant and the duke realised that he had forgotten to acknowledge the wound.

'Tou jours gai, mon coeur!' He wondered if he were dying, but no, the pain faded and became an unpleasant ache. He was still able to continue. He drew himself upright, conscious of the Iron Orchid's high-pitched voice in the background.

'En tou rage!' he warned, and lunged before he had properly regained his balance, falling sideways against Lord Shark's sword, but able to step back in time, recall his

training and position himself properly so that when Lord Shark lunged again, he parried the stroke, returned it, parried again and returned again.

The Duke of Queens wondered at the temperature changes in his body. He had felt uncomfortably warm and now he felt a chill throughout, from head to toe, with only his wound glowing hot, but no longer very painful

And Lord Shark the Unknown pushed past the duke's defence and the point of his sword gouged flesh from the duke's left arm, just below the shoulder.

'Oh!' cried the duke, and then: 'Toujours gai!'

In grim silence, Lord Shark the Unknown gave him a few moments in which to recover.

The Duke of Queens was surprised at his own reaction, now, for he quickly resumed his stance, coolly gave his warning, and found that a new emotion directed him. He believed that the emotion must be 'fear'.

And his lunges became more precise, his parries swifter, firmer, so that Lord Shark the Unknown lost balance time after time and was hard-pressed to regain it. It seemed to some of those who watched that Lord Shark was nonplussed by this new, cold attack. He began to lose ground, backing further and further away under the momentum of the duke's new-found energy.

And then the Duke of Queens, unthinking, merely a duellist, thrust once and struck Lord Shark the Unknown in the heart.

Although he must have been quite dead, Lord Shark stood erect for a little while, gradually lowering his sword and then falling, as stiff in death as he had been in life, onto the hard earth; his blood flooded from him, giving nourishment to the dust.

The Duke of Queens was astonished by what he had accomplished. Even as the Iron Orchid and his other friends came slowly towards him, he found that he was shaking.

The duke dropped his blade. His natural reaction, at this time, would have made immediate arrangements for Lord Shark's resurrection, but Lord Shark had been firm, remorseless in his affirmation that if death came to him he must remain dead through the rest of Time. The duke wondered at the thoughts and feelings, all unfamiliar, which filled him.

He could not understand why the Iron Orchid smiled and kissed him and congratulated him, why My Lady Charlotina

babbled of the excitement he had provided, why Bishop Castle and his old acquaintance Captain Oliphaunt clapped him on the back and reminded him of his wounds.

'You are a Hero, darling duke!' cried the Everlasting Concubine. 'You must let me nurse you back to health!'

'A fine display, glamorous Lord of Queens!' heartily praised the captain. 'Not since "Cannibals" has there been such entertainment!'

'Indeed, the fashion begins already! Look!' Bishop Castle displayed a long and jewelled blade.

The Duke of Queens groaned and fell to his knees. 'I have killed Lord Shark,' he said. A tear appeared on his cheek.

In the reproduction of what had been either a space- or air-ship, and had been part of the collection long since abandoned by the Duke of Queens, Sergeant Martinez and his men peered through portholes at the distant ground. The ship had ceased to rise but now was to be borne by the currents of the wind. No response came from the engines; propellers did not turn, rockets did not fire – even the little sails rigged along the upper hull would not unfurl when Sergeant Martinez sent a reluctant Denereaz out to climb the ladder which clung to the surface of what was either a gas-bag or a fuel-tank.

'We have been suckered,' announced Sergeant Martinez, after some thought. 'This is not a Time Machine.'

'Not so far,' agreed Trooper Gan Hok, helping himself to exotic food paste from a cabinet. The ship was well-stocked with provisions, with alcohol and dope.

'We could be up here forever,' said Sergeant Martinez.

'Well, for a good while,' agreed Trooper Smith. 'After all, sarge, what goes up must, eventually, come down - if we're still in this planet's gravity field, that is. Which we are.'

Only Trooper Kevin O'Dwyer appeared to have accepted the situation with equanimity. He lay on a divan of golden plush while the stolen automata brought him the finest food from the cabinets.

'And what I'd like to know, O'Dwyer, is why that damn robot'll only respond to your commands,' said Sergeant Martinez darkly.

'Maybe it respects me, sarge?'

Without much conviction, Sergeant Martinez said: 'You

ought to be disciplined for insubordination, O'Dwyer. You seem to be enjoying all this.'

'We ought to make the best of it, that's all,' said O'Dwyer. 'Do you think there's any way of getting in touch with the surface. We could ask them to send up some girls.'

'Be careful, O'Dwyer.' Sergeant Martinez lay back on his own couch and closed his eyes, taking a strong pull on his cigar. 'That sounds like fraternisation to me. Don't forget that those people have to be regarded as alien belligerents!'

'Sorry, sarge. Robot, bring me another drink of that green stuff, will you?'

The automaton seemed to hesitate.

'Hurry it up,' said O'Dwyer.

Returning with the drink, the automaton handed it to O'Dwyer and then hissed through its mask.

'What purpose is there any longer to this deception, O'Dwyer?'

O'Dwyer rose and took the robot by the arm, leading it from the main passenger lounge into the control chamber, now unoccupied. 'You must realise, Lord Shark, that if they realise I made a mistake and brought you up here instead of the robot, they'll use you as a bargaining counter.'

'Should I care?'

'That's for you to decide.'

'Your logic in substituting one of my automata for me and sending it out with the Iron Orchid to fight the Duke of Queens is still a mystery to me.'

'Well, it's pretty simple to explain, Shark. The duke was used to fighting robots – so I gave him a sporting chance. Also, when it's discovered it's a robot, and he's dead, they'll be able to bring him back to life – 'cause the rules will have been broken. Get it? If the robot's been put out of action, so what? Yeah?'

'Why should you have bothered to interfere?'

'I like the guy. I didn't want to see him killed. Besides, it was a favour to the Iron Orchid, too – and she looks like a lady who likes to return a favour. We worked it out between us.'

'I heard you. Releasing me from my bonds when it was too late for me to return, then suggesting to your comrades that I was an automaton. Well, I shall tell them that you have deceived them.'

'Go ahead. I'll deny it.'

Lord Shark the Unknown walked to the porthole, study-

ing the peculiar purple clouds which someone had created in this part of the sky.

'All my life I have been unable to see the point of human activity,' he said. 'I have found every experience further proof of the foolishness of my fellows, of the absolute uselessness of existence. I thought that no expression of that stupidity could bewilder me again. Now, I must admit, that my assumptions, my opinions, my most profound beliefs seem to dissipate and leave me as confused as I was when I first came into this tired and decadent universe. You are an alien yourself. Why should you help the Duke of Queens?'

'I told you. I like him. He doesn't know when to come in out of the rain. I fixed things so nobody lost. Is that bad?'

'You did all that, including risking the disapproval of your fellows, out of an emotion of – what – affection? – for that buffoon?'

'Call it enlightened self-interest. The fact is that the whole thing's de-fused. I didn't think we'd get off this planet, or out of this age, and I'm glad we haven't. I like it here. But Sergeant Martinez had to make the attempt, and I had to go along with him, to keep him happy. Don't worry, we'll soon be on-planet again.'

He gave Lord Shark the Unknown a friendly slap on the back. 'All honour satisfied, eh?'

And Lord Shark laughed.

THE BEES OF KNOWLEDGE

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It scarcely seems necessary to relate how I first came to be cast on to Handrea, like a man thrown up on a strange shore. To the Bees of Handrea these details, though possibly known to them, are of negligible interest since in their regard I rate as no more than an unremarkable piece of flotsam that chanced to drift into their domain. Let it suffice, then, that I had paused to say a prayer at the shrine of Saint Hysastum, the patron saint of interstellar travellers, when an explosion in the region of the engine room wrecked the entire liner. The cause of the catastrophe remains a mystery to me. Such accidents are far from common aboard passenger ships, though when they do occur subsequent rescue is an uncertain hope, owing to the great choice of routes open to interstellar navigators and their habit of changing course in mid-flight to provide additional sightseeing.

My timely devotions saved my life, though reserving me for a weirder fate. Within seconds I was able to gain a lifeboat, which was stationed thoughtfully adjacent to the shrine and, amid flame and buckling metal I was ejected into space. After the explosion, picking my way through the scattered debris, I learned that no one but myself had escaped.

The crushing sense of desolation that comes over one at such a moment cannot adequately be described. Nothing brings one so thoroughly face to face with blind, uncaring Nature as this sudden, utter remoteness from one's fellow human beings. Here I was, surrounded by vast light years of space, with probably not another human soul within hundreds of parsecs, totally alone and very nearly helpless.

My feeling of isolation mounted to a state of terror when I discovered that the rescue beacon was not operating. Once again I had recourse to prayer, which calmed me a little and brought me to a more hopeful appraisal of my situation. The lifeboat, I reminded myself, could keep me alive for up to a year if all went well. There would have been little point in activating the beacon immediately in any case. The star liner would not be reported missing for several weeks, and taking into account the delay before a search was organised, and the dozens of possible routes to be surveyed, a sweep within range of the beacon might not occur for months, if at all. During that time its repair seemed a feasible project, or at any rate not a hopeless one.

But it could not be done conveniently in space, and I peered again through the lifeboat's portholes. On one side glimmered a reddish-yellow sun. Close by on the other side hung a big murky globe resembling an overripe fruit – the planet Handrea, to provide a view of which the star liner had been slowing down at the time of the explosion. It had received its name but an hour previously from one of the passengers (the privilege of naming newly sighted worlds being another of the minor perquisites of interstellar travel) and had already been ascertained as being tolerable as regards chemistry and geology. So, heartened by having at least some course of action to pursue, I turned my small lifeboat towards it.

As I passed through them I made a careful recording of the bands of magnetism and radiation that planets of this type usually possess, noting as I did so that they were uncommonly strong and complicated. I was perturbed to find that the atmosphere was a deep one, descending nearly seven hundred miles. Upon my entering its outer fringes the sky turned from jet black to dark brown and the stars quickly vanished from sight. A hundred miles further down I entered a sphere of electrical storms and was buffeted about by powerful gusts. It had been my intention, had Handrea looked unduly inhospitable, to fly straight out again, but before long it was all I could do to keep on an even keel, not being an expert pilot. Eventually, much relieved after a harrowing passage, I entered the layer of calm air that lies close to the surface and accomplished a landing amid large tufts of a plant which, though maroon in colour, could fairly be described as grasslike.

I peered at the landscape. Vision was limited to about a

hundred yards, and within this span I saw only the mild undulations of the ground, the drab coloration of the vegetation, the dull grey air. Instruments told me that the air was dense, but not of the intolerable pressure suggested by the depth of the atmosphere, consisting of light inert gases and about five per cent oxygen. The temperature, at twenty degrees, was comfortable enough to require no special protective clothing.

After a while I put on an oxygen mask – not trusting myself to the outside's natural mix - and equalised pressures before opening the hatch. Taking with me the lifeboat's tool kit, I stepped outside to remove the beacon's service plate.

Underfoot the maroon grass had a thick-piled springy texture. As I moved the air felt thick, almost like water, and perfect silence prevailed. I tried to close my mind to the fact that I stood on an alien and unknown planet, and concentrated on the task in hand.

I worked thus for perhaps twenty minutes before becoming aware of a low-pitched droning or burring sound, which, almost before I could react to it, swelled in volume until it made the air vibrate all about me. Like the parting of a curtain the opaque atmosphere suddenly disgorged two huge flying shapes. And so I saw them for the first time: the Bees of Handrea.

Describing them offers no particular difficulties, since unlike many alien forms of life they can be compared with a terrestrial species. They are, of course, vast if measured alongside our Earthly bees, and the resemblance is in some respects a superficial one. The body, in two segments, is nearly twice the size of a man, the thorax being very large and round so as to make the creature closest in appearance, perhaps, to our bumble bee. As in the terrestrial bee the fur is striped but only slightly so - a relic, I would guess, from some previous evolutionary period the Bees have passed through – the stripes being fuzzy fawn and soft gold, so that the Bees seemed almost to shine in their monotonous environment.

On Earth this great mass could never take to the air at all, but the density of Handrea's atmosphere enables such a creature to be supported by two pairs of surprisingly small wings which vibrate rapidly, giving off the pronounced drone I had first noticed. The Bees move, moreover, with all the speed and agility of their Earthly counterparts. Their

arrival occasioned me some alarm, naturally, and I attempted to make a hasty retreat into the lifeboat, but I had time to take only a couple of steps before one of the huge creatures had darted to me and lifted me up with its frontward limbs which ended in tangles of hooks and pincers.

The desperation of my initial struggles may be imagined. From acquaintance with Earthly insects I had expected instantly to receive some dreadful sting which would paralyse me or kill me outright, and I fought with all my might to free myself from the monster. In the struggle my oxygen mask was torn loose and fell to the ground, so that for the first time, with a cold shock, I drew Handrea's air into my lungs. All my efforts were to no avail; no sting was forthcoming, but the Bee merely modified its powerful grip so as to leave me completely helpless, and I was borne off into the mists, leaving the lifeboat far behind.

The two Bees flew, as near as I could tell, in a straight line, keeping abreast of one another. The narrow patch of landscape in my view at any one time presented no change of aspect, but we travelled through the foggy, impenetrable air at what seemed to me a prodigious speed. Unhindered now by my oxygen mask, the world of Handrea met my senses with a new immediacy. The breath that coursed through my nostrils smelled damp, bearing hints of dank vegetable fragrance. Quite separate from this, I was aware of the much stronger smell of the Bee that carried me – a sharp, oddly sweet smell that could not be ignored.

Reminding myself of insect habits, I was fearful now of a much worse fate than being stung to death. My imagination worked apace: these Bees would hardly have seized me for nothing, I told myself, and in all probability their intention was to use me as a body in which to lay eggs, so that the larvae could feed off my live flesh. In my despair I even contemplated the sin of suicide, wondering how I might kill myself before the worst happened. When I remember these fears now, my present circumstances seem relatively good.

On and on we droned, the increasing distance between myself and the lifeboat, and the virtual impossibility of my ever returning to it, causing me no small agony of mind. At least an hour, and possibly several, passed in this fashion before the Bees' destination came looming out of the fog.

At first I took the shape ahead to be an oddly-formed mountain until its artificial nature became apparent. Then it emerged as an uneven, elongated dome whose limits

passed entirely out of sight in the dimness: a stupendous beehive. I now know its height to attain several thousand feet, with nearly the same proportions at the base. As we came closer a generalised humming could be heard emanating from the huge edifice. At the same time I saw giant bees flitting hither and thither, coming and going from the great hive.

We approached an entrance set about a hundred feet from ground level and without pause passed through to the interior. I observed a number of Bees stationed just within the opening, some apparently standing guard, others vibrating their wings rapidly, presumably to ventilate the hive as bees do on Earth. Indeed, their work set up such a wind that the clothes were nearly torn from my back as my captors alighted on the floor of the vestibule. From this chamber several passages radiated – that, at least, was my first impression. As my captors set off down one of these I realised that in fact the openings all connected with one another; the internal structure of the hive was largely an open one, the space of any level being divided by the pillars which supported the next.

I will not dwell on how fully I appreciated the horror of my apparent situation as I was dragged into this den. Bees swarmed everywhere, and their pungent-sweet smell was overpowering. To think that I, a human being bearing a spark of the divinity, was reduced to the role of some smaller insect for these beasts, as if I were a caterpillar or a grub, affected me almost as strongly as the thought of the physical horror which I had no doubt was to come. Deeper and deeper I was carried into the hive, descending and ascending I did not know how many levels. It was like a vast city, filled with the rustling, buzzing and chittering of its inhabitants. Once my captors (they remained together) were accosted by a group of their fellows and performed a kind of waggling dance, at the same time emitting loud noises which sounded like the wailing of a whole team of buzz-saws. Finally our journey came to an end: the two Bees halted in a bowl-shaped depression some tens of feet across, and the hold on my aching body was at last released.

I tumbled, rolled over, and steeled myself to take my first good look at the Bee's head: the faceted eyes glinting with myriad colours, the rolled proboscis, the tufted cheeks and the swollen cranium, all of which are now so familiar to me. Unable to bear the suspense any longer I squeezed my eyes

shut and tried not to exist. Now it would come – the deep-thrusting sting, mortal as any sword, or the cruel insertion of the ovipositor.

The muscular limbs turned me over and over, bristly fur scratching my skin. When, after some time, nothing else transpired I opened my eyes a little. The two Bees were huddled over me, holding me almost in a double embrace, and fondling me with their forelegs. Their wings trembled; their droning buzz-saw voices, with no articulation that I could discern, rose and fell in harmony. The movements of the forelegs became light and caressing, so that I wondered what kind of insect ritual I was being subjected to. Then, to my surprise, the manipulatory claws began clumsily to strip me of my clothing. Shortly I lay naked, while my garments were lifted one by one, inspected and tossed aside.

The Bees' attention returned to my naked body, probing it with a feather-like touch, examining orifices, holding me upside down or in whatever fashion was convenient, as though I were an inanimate object. I experienced a moment of supreme terror when a stiff digit entered my anus and slid up my rectum. The organ withdrew in a second or two, but I was left in little uncertainty of mind as to what had taken place.

At length the Bees seemed to have finished. One wandered off, while the other lifted me up and took to the air again. I observed that we were in a spacious vault, allowing the Bees ample room for flight and somewhat dimly lit (unlike much of the hive I had passed through). We swooped low to pass under a barrier, swam up a sort of gully, and emerged in yet another vault even larger, whose far side was not clearly visible but which contained great indistinct piles. On one of these the Bee unceremoniously dropped me, and I sprawled and slithered down a slope composed of loose objects, like a rubbish heap.

After the Bee had flown away my urgent concern was with the eggs I felt sure it had deposited in my rectum. I felt up with my finger as far as I could, but encountered nothing. I decided it was imperative to sweep out the passage straight away. After a great deal of frantic straining I managed to pass an amount of fecal matter and examined it anxiously for sign of the eggs. There was none, and eventually I concluded with immense relief that the Bee's intrusion had been exploratory, nothing more.

Finding myself unexpectedly alive and unharmed, I was

able to take a more leisurely interest in my surroundings. The first question to pique my curiosity was how the interior of the hive came to be lighted, when it should have been in complete darkness. Some parts of it, in fact, were bathed in a fairly bright haze. Peering at the near-by wall of the vault, I saw that the material out of which the hive was constructed was itself fluorescent, thus explaining the mystery. I pondered a little further on the nature of this material. Being phosphorescent it was very likely organic in origin, I reflected. Possibly the Bees used their own excrement as a building material, as termites do on Earth.

Perhaps this luminosity was an accidental by-product and extraneous to the Bees' needs. But if it formed part of their economy then it was a wonderful example of the ingenuity of Nature, which had evolved phosphorescent excrement for such a purpose.

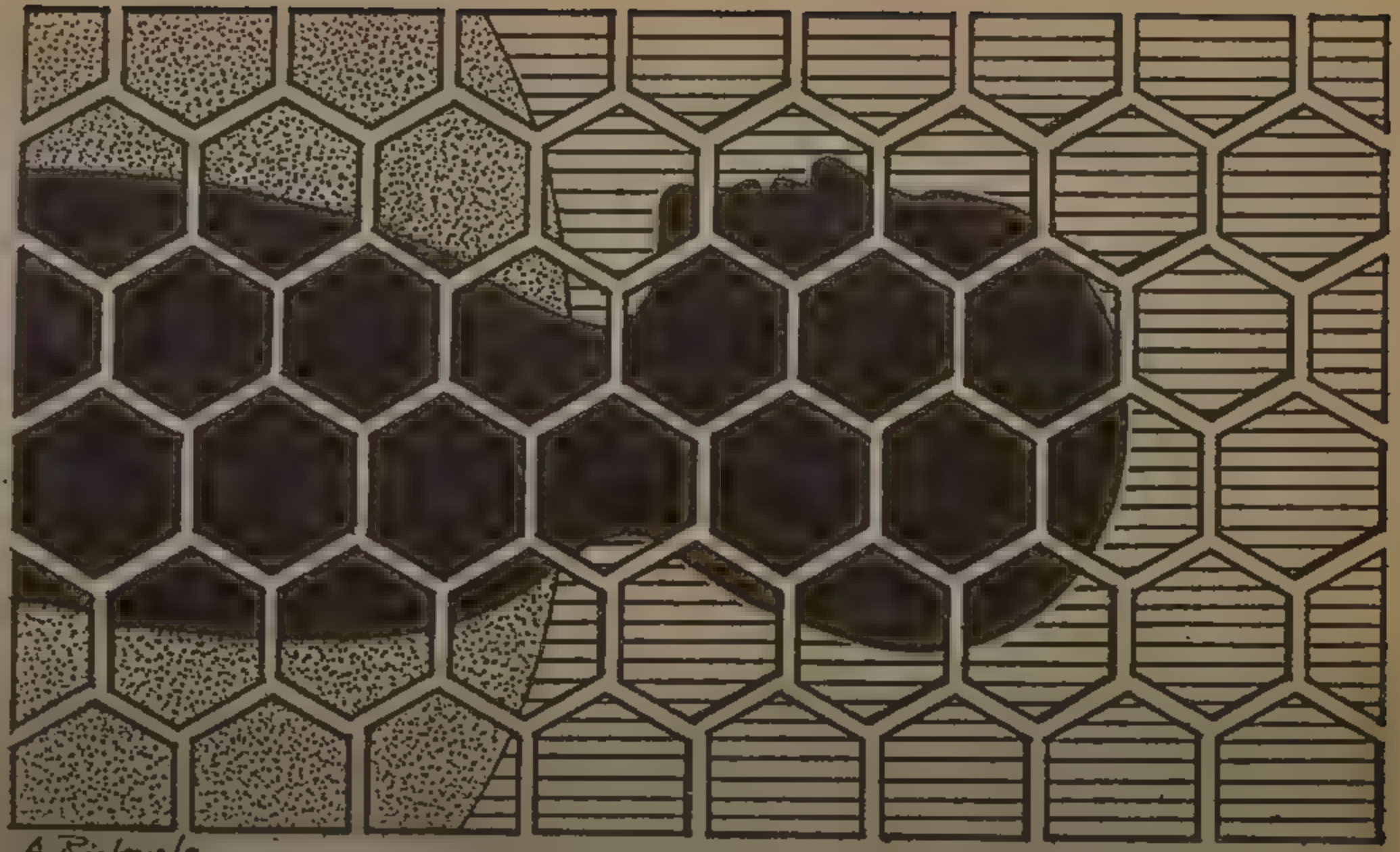
I pulled myself upright on the unsteady pile where I was precariously perched and took a closer survey of my immediate environs. I stood on a jumble of objects of various shapes and sizes, all indistinct in the gloom. Bending, I picked one up.

The thing was made of a substance indistinguishable from wood. And it was a carving of some kind of animal, perhaps another giant insect, with a peculiar flowering snout. I was not sure whether the representation was meant to be a naturalistic one or whether it was fanciful; what was in no doubt was that it was the product of art.

I dropped it and selected another object. This turned out to be something whose purpose I could not decipher: a black rod about three feet in length with a hemispherical bowl attached to one end. But again, I judged it to be artificial.

In a state of fresh excitement I extended my explorations. The heap proved to be varied in its composition; much of it consisted of decayed vegetable matter. But buried in it, strewn on top of it, piled here and there, was a treasure house of alien artefacts too diverse to describe. Many of them were rotted, broken and crushed, but others seemed intact and even new.

What was the reason for this rubbish heap? Who had manufactured the artefacts? Not the Bees – somehow that did not strike me as a likely proposition, and the impression was confirmed when I found what I could only call, from its shape and size, a drinking cup.



Bees would not use drinking cups.

Somewhere on this planet, then, was an intelligent race. While I was mulling this over there came a loud droning noise and another Bee entered the vault, dropped an article on the heap and departed. I scrambled towards the discarded object and discovered it to be a mysterious instrument consisting of hinged and interlocking boxes.

I recalled the manner in which I had been snatched from the ground while attempting to repair my rescue beacon, and all seemed to become clear to me. The Bees had a magpie instinct: they were collectors of any object they came across that attracted their attention. I, just like anything else, had been added to their mindless hoard.

For some time that remained the total of my understanding of the Bees of Handrea.

At length I clambered down from the pile and began to explore beyond the vault. By now hunger was beginning to affect me, and while I still could not speculate as to what my future might be, I wondered as to the possibility of obtaining food.

My needs were answered much sooner than I had expected. Half an hour of probing (trying always to keep track of my movements) brought me to a wall which exuded a heavy, sweet aroma. This wall was made of a golden bread-like substance which crumbled and broke easily in the hand to yield chunks from which seeped a light yellow syrup. It had every appearance of being edible, and though afraid of poisoning myself I sampled a morsel, recalling that though the protein structure of alien life may differ from our own, that protein is everywhere constructed out of the same small group of amino acids, into which the digestive system decomposes it. I was soon reassured: the bread was delicious, sweet without being nauseous, and of a texture like honey-cake. As a food it proved completely satisfying. I ate a quantity of it, reasoning as I did so that in all probability this was a corner of the Bees' food store, or at any rate of one of a number of such stores.

My meal was interrupted by a rustling sound. I was alarmed to see the approach of an insect-like creature, smaller than the Bees and indeed somewhat smaller than myself, but nevertheless of horrifying appearance. I was put in mind of a fly – not the common housefly, but something closer to a mosquito, with small folded wings and spike-like proboscis. I ran for my life, but on rounding a corner of the

passageway, and hearing no sound of pursuit, I stopped and cautiously peeped back. The Fly had inserted its proboscis into the honey-bread and was presumably sucking out the liqueur.

I decided to risk no further confrontation but made my way back to the vault where lay the junk-heaps. There I discovered some pools of brackish water and further refreshed myself. Then I set about finding a weapon in case I should need to defend myself against monsters such as I had just witnessed – or, for that matter, against the Bees, though I fervently hoped I should not be called upon to fight such prodigious creatures. After some searching I found a long metal pole with a pointed end which would serve tolerably well as a spear.

The vault seemed empty, lonely, silent and echoing. From afar came the continual murmur of the business of the hive, like the ceaseless activity of a city, but it barely broke the silence. Already I had begun to think of the place as a refuge, and eventually I found a spot for myself where, wearied and strained by my experiences, I settled down to sleep.

On waking I drank more water and made the short trip to obtain more honey-bread. Then, naked though I was, and armed with my spear, I set out to explore the hive in earnest.

Thus began a fairly long period in which I acquainted myself with the life of the great bee-city, though in what I now know to be a superficial way. Slowly and tentatively I explored the passages and galleries, making sure all the time that I could find my way back to the familiar territory of the junk heaps where I was at least assured of water and food, and to which I periodically returned to rest. Always I made my way upwards, searching for the entrance by which I had been brought into the hive.

The Bees, who busied themselves everywhere, consistently ignored me. I discovered that the hive was host to numerous other parasites like myself, species of insects and giant worms who had made their home here and were apparently tolerated, if they were noticed at all. Usually (but not invariably) they were smaller than the bees, and either stole honeybread or stalked one another for food. Thus for any

but the Bees themselves (who of course were never attacked) the hive was a jungle in which every ecological niche was filled.

The dangers to myself were considerable, and I soon found that I had been lucky in my choice of weapon, for the spear enabled me to keep most predators at bay. Nevertheless my early experiences were horrifying. On my first reconnoitre I was attacked three times: twice by grub-like beasts with hideous scissor-type jaws, and once by something resembling a giant mite whose habit it is to drop a net on passers-by from above. I could not free myself from this trap for some time, during which I was obliged to fight for my life while still enmeshed, wielding the spear through the holes and finally killing my adversary.

I quickly learned which species were harmless and which to beware. I learned to recognise the kind of corners and approaches the predators were apt to lurk in, and so these bouts of deadly combat became much less frequent.

My third sortie brought me at last to the entrance. I hesitated on the approach to the vestibule, seeing ahead of me the humped shapes of the guards, and bracing myself against the wind set up by the whirring wings of the ventilator Bees. So powerful was this dense current that when I finally went forward I was obliged to edge myself across the floor with the help of my spear. I stopped close to the broad slot-like opening and looked out into the free air of Handrea.

A fog-like cold smote my skin, in contrast to the warmth of the hive. I could see only thick misty air which eddied and swirled as more Bees came to alight inside the entrance. The ground was quite out of sight.

I believe the guards would not have prevented me from leaving the hive. I could have scrambled down its rough surface to the ground. But where to then? I had no means of achieving the goal which had been uppermost in my mind: that of returning to the lifeboat and completing the repair of the beacon. Not only had I no idea of which direction to take, but I had no way of holding to that direction if I found it. Once away from the hive I would be unlikely to locate it again, and would die of hunger or thirst or else fall victim to larger predators than I had yet seen.

But could I accept the corollary: that I must live out my remaining years in the hive with the status of a parasitic worm? A curiously forlorn, deserted feeling came over me: I had been treated badly during the explosion on the pas-

senger liner; my companions had all died and been spared any further problems, but I had been excluded from the common fate and left alone, abandoned by death.

This odd and sinful feeling lasted but a minute or two. With heavy heart I made my way back down below, wondering if I could pluck up the courage for the near-suicidal attempt to retrace the course of the Bees who had brought me here. When I arrived at the junkheaps an extraordinary sight met my eyes. There, flung at a lurching angle atop the nearest pile, was the lifeboat!

I scrambled up the heap towards it with a cry of joy. On reaching the small spacecraft, however, I was in for a crushing disappointment. It had been gutted. Everything had been stripped from it, inside and out, leaving only an empty shell.

Strewn over a fairly wide area round about was all the equipment with which the lifeboat had been stocked. To my astonishment every item had been torn to pieces: the Bees seemed to exhibit a destructive animal curiosity over everything they touched. I found the beacon after searching for some minutes. Like everything else it was completely wrecked, practically disintegrated component by component. Any kind of repair was absolutely out of the question, and after staring at the remains for some while in a state of shock, I sat down and buried my face in my hands, sobbing to think what life was to mean to me from now on.

For some time afterwards wild schemes were apt to enter my head. It occurred to me that perhaps I was not necessarily doomed to remain indefinitely in the hive. Judging by the contents of the junkheaps intelligence existed somewhere on the planet, and the Bees visited the scene of that intelligence. I entertained the notion of clinging to a Bee's back, possibly attaching myself there by means of a harness, and flying with it to where life might be more agreeable, even though I still would not be among my own kind. It was even possible, I conjectured (remembering that some of the artefacts I had seen denoted a fairly advanced technology) that once learning of my plight the creatures I met would be kind enough to set up a beacon of their own to signal the rescue ship, if I could explain its mode of operation clearly enough.

These plans served chiefly to ward off my despair, for

common sense told me how unlikely they were to succeed. My faith also came under great strain at this time, but I am glad to say I retained it, though with some difficulty at first, and prayer was, as ever, my solace.

But as the days succeeded one another my mood turned to one of apathy, although I tried to rouse myself to action and to remind myself that the time remaining before a search expedition arrived within signalling distance was not unlimited. Thinking that I should fashion a harness with which to carry out my project of riding on a Bee, I began to sort through the junkheaps. The detritus of alien industry was fascinating to browse through. I presumed at first that the artefacts were all the product of the same civilisation, but later I realised that I had no verification of this. Indeed I could construct no picture of a single culture out of the objects I perused; rather they suggested a number of different, quite unconnected civilisations, or even species.

I was also struck by the number of artefacts which were clearly not tools or ornaments and whose use could not easily be discerned. At length I discovered some of the more curiously shaped of them to bear close-packed markings, and I surmised that these and others, including some I believed to be electronic in operation, were books or records of some kind, though I could not explain why they made up such a large percentage of the junkheaps.

My desultory efforts to escape the hive were all brought to an end when an extraordinary event occurred. I had gone on another exploratory foray with the intention of making some rough assessment of Bee anatomy when the usual bumbling activity of the hive turned to a state of agitation. I heard sounds of rending and general destruction, and on investigating perceived that numbers of the Bees were engaged in tearing down parts of the hive. The reason for this soon became apparent: they were clearing a passage for a great ship, too large to enter the hive by any of its entrances or to negotiate its interior spaces.

The ship was clearly built to ride on water. Of a wood-like material, it had a sweeping profile at least a hundred and fifty feet long, with an elegant pattern of raised decks at intervals, stepped slightly higher forward and aft. In its general lines the closest resemblance would be, I suppose, to a Greek galley, a resemblance heightened by the carving which adorned the fore and aft railings and the protruding wales which swept from stem to stern. The brute force by

which the Bees moved this ship was a sight to behold. They must have flown it here an unknown distance by the concerted power of their wings alone – a feat which even in Handrea's thickened atmosphere was astonishing – and now they nudged, heaved and strained at it in their hundreds, wings buzzing in a deafening clamour (for it appeared to be their wings they mostly used to gain traction). The ship lurched forward foot by foot, grinding and crushing everything in its path, shouldering aside masses of building material where the cleared pathway was not wide enough, and causing yet more to come crashing down behind it. Where it had passed Bees set to work immediately to repair the damage, a task which I knew they could accomplish with unbelievable rapidity.

Steadily the ship was being edged into the heart of the hive. I crept forward, dodged past Bee bodies, and found myself able to clamber up the side of the vessel. Briefly I found myself standing on the deck, which, I was interested to see, was inlaid with silvery designs. I could see no sign of any crew. A moment later I heard an impatient buzz behind me and a bristly limb knocked me over the side. I fell to the ground, winded and badly bruised.

Slowly the ship jerked from view amid clouds of dust and a rain of rubble, swaying cumbersomely. Limping, I followed, still curious and wondering how the Bees were regarded by the intelligent race or races from whom they filched so many valuable artefacts.

It occurred to me that for all my wanderings I had remained in the peripheral region of the hive, my mind obsessed by the idea of escape. Vaguely I had imagined the hive to present the same aspect wherever one stood in it, but venturing deeper into the interior in pursuit of the ship I saw my mistake. The light strengthened to become a golden ambience in which the golden fur of the Bees shone. The architecture of the hive also changed. The monotonous tiered floors gave way to a more complex structure in which there were spiral ramps, great halls, and linked chambers of various shapes, sometimes comprising whole banks of huge polyhedra of perfect geometrical regularity, so that the hive came to resemble more and more the 'golden palace' beloved of the more sentimental naturalists when writing of Earthly Bees. And the sharp-sweet odour of these Bees, to which I thought I had become accustomed, became so strong that I was almost stifled.

All these wonders, like everything else about the Bees, I understood up to this moment to be the product of instinct. I had almost caught up with the lurching ship when I saw something which gave me pause for thought.

A number of artefacts had apparently fallen from the ship in the course of its progress and lay about in the rubble. One Bee lingered and was playing with a device of a shiny brown material, in shape somewhere between a sphere and a cube and numbering among its features several protuberances and a circular plate of dull silver. The Bee touched a protuberance with a foreleg, and the plate came abruptly to life.

I edged closer to spy on what was taking place. The plate showed a full-colour motion picture that at first was of no recognisable object or scene. After some moments I realised that it was displaying a series of geometrical figures arranged in a logical series. A mathematics lesson!

To my bemusement the huge insect's gaze seemed intent on the picture plate. Shortly it again touched the protuberance, which was a control of the sliding sort, and the picture changed to a text in some kind of writing or ideograms, illustrated by enigmatic symbols. Again the Bee followed the lesson with every appearance of understanding it, but even when this was succeeded by the Bee's manipulating various knobs in seemingly skilful fashion, eliciting information at will, I still could not grasp what the evidence of my eyes suggested.

The Bee turned to another pastime. It turned the device over and in a few moments had removed the outer casing. A mass of close-packed parts was revealed, which the Bee took to pieces with surprisingly delicate pincers. I thought I was seeing the usual destructiveness I already had cause to complain of on the part of these insects, but was astonished by what followed. With the machine in fragments, the Bee suddenly set to work to put it all together again. In a minute or two it was again functioning perfectly.

Along came a second Bee. A buzz-saw exchange took place between them. Wings trembled. The first Bee again stripped down the machine. Together they played with the components, assembling and disassembling them several times over, their droning voices rising and falling, until finally they tired of the game and the pieces were flung carelessly to the ground.

There could be no doubt of it. The Bees were intelligent! And they understood technology!

Saint Hysastum, I thought, you have answered my prayers!

How foolish I had been to give practically no thought to this possibility! How ridiculous to plan journeys across Handrea when the answer lay right here under my nose!

But why had the Bees behaved towards me like brute beasts? I recalled that I had been outside the lifeboat when they arrived. Possibly I had been taken for a denizen of their own planet. They had mistaken my nature, just as I had mistaken theirs.

But it was imperative that I enlighten them without delay. I dashed forward, right under the gaze of those huge mosaic eyes, and began scratching diagrams in the dust with my spear. A circle, a triangle, a square, a pentagon – surely a sentient creature familiar with mathematics (as my recent observations showed the Bee to be) would recognise these as signs of intelligence on my part? The Bee did not seem to notice and made to move off, but I skipped forward again, placing myself impetuously in its path, and again began my eager scribbling. I made three dots, then another three, followed by six dots – a clear demonstration that I could count! For good measure I scribbled out the diagram that accompanies Pythagoras' theorem, even though it is perhaps too elaborate for a first contact between species. The Bee seemed nonplussed for a moment. But then it brushed me aside and passed on, followed by its companion.

My frantic efforts as I sought to make contact with the Bees during the next hour or two approached the level of hysteria. All was to no avail. I remained a nonentity as far as they were concerned: I spoke to them, gesticulated, drew, showed them my spear and play-acted its use, but was simply ignored. From their conduct, which to all appearances exemplified insect mindlessness, it was hard to believe that they really possessed intelligence.

At last, disheartened and perplexed, I returned to my quiet refuge in the vault of the junkheaps. I was not completely alone there: the Fly, the mosquito-like creature I had first encountered at the honeybread bank, was pottering about among the rubbish. I often met this creature on my trips to the honeybread, and occasionally it ventured into the vault and roamed aimlessly among the heaps of artefacts. Never having received any threat from it, I had come to accept its presence.

Sighing and despairing, I fell at length into a light sleep. And as I slept I dreamed.

We came between a defile in the hills and ahead of us, with mist rising and falling about it like steam, lay the Hive. Bees came hither and thither in ceaseless streams. Otwun, my Handreatic companion, a member of one of the mammalian species of the planet, laid a hand on my shoulder.

'There it is,' he said. 'The Hive of the Bees of Knowledge, where is made the Honey of Experience.'

I glanced into his opal eyes. From the cast of his face I knew he was feeling a certain kind of emotion. 'You seem afraid of these creatures,' I remarked. 'Are they dangerous?'

'They are voracious and implacable,' he answered. 'They know everything old and discover everything new. They range over the whole world in search of knowledge, which is their food, taking it wherever they find it. Yet no man can communicate with them.'

'An aloof intelligence then? No pacts or alliances are made with the Bees? No wars or quarrels?'

'Such is out of the question. The Bees are not beings such as the warm-blooded races. They belong in the class of creeping, crawling and flying things. Come, we must pass by the Hive if we are to be about our business.'

We went forward, the fine rain laying a mantle about our shoulders and casting the Hive in a lush setting. We skirted the Hive to the east, but suddenly a huge Bee loomed out of the mist and hovered before us, giving off a loud buzzing sound that wavered up and down the scale. Although Otwun had told me it was impossible to communicate with the Bees the buzzing penetrated my brain like bright light through glass and seemed somehow to bypass the speech centre to impart information directly to my consciousness. A terrifying flood of knowledge of the most dazzling and intellectual kind overwhelmed me and caused me almost to faint . . .

I awoke with the dream vivid in my mind. It was the kind of dream that leaves behind it a mingling of hopeful emotions, seeming to convey a message more real than waking reality itself. I strove to recover the tacit details of the dream – what, for instance was the important business

on which I and Otwun were engaged? But these were gone, as they often are in dreams, and I was left with only the central theme: the nature of the Bees of Handrea. Of this I had received a direct and compelling impression, much more comprehensive than was implied by Otwun's few remarks.

Every sentient creature's intelligence is modified by its ancestral nature. Bees are honey gatherers. Hence when intellectual curiosity developed in the Bees of Handrea it took just this form. The Bees liked to forage into their world seeking to satisfy their avid thirst for knowledge and to bring back their findings into the hive. The physical objects they brought back were of cursory interest only: their main diet was of intellectual ideas and observations, which they were adept at stealing from surrounding civilisations.

This interpretation of the Bees made such an impression on me that, irrationally perhaps, I accepted it as literally true. I believed I had been vouchsafed a minor vision by Saint Hysastum to help me. Then I recalled a passage by the philosopher Nietzsche who lived some centuries ago. Although a heathen in his outlook Nietzsche had many insights. Here he depicted man's mind as a beehive. We are honey gatherers, bringing in little loads of knowledge and ideas – exactly like the Bees of Handrea.

Nietzsche was also the inventor of the doctrine of eternal recurrence, which posits that since the universe is infinite and eternal everything in it, including the Earth and all its inhabitants, must somewhere, sometime, be repeated. If one follows this argument further then it means that every product of man's imagination must somewhere be a reality – and here was Nietzsche's mental beehive, not as the analogy he had conceived, but a literal reality! What a strange confirmation of Nietzsche's beliefs!

There was a slurping sound. The Fly was sucking up water from one of the tepid pools.

Elsewhere on Handrea, the dream had reminded me, were other races, less alien than the Bees and more amenable to contact. Should I perhaps stock up with honeybread and strike out on foot in the hope of finding them? But no – the message of the dream clearly indicated that it was with the Bees that my salvation lay. It would be wrong to reject Saint Hysastum's advice.

Accordingly I turned my mind again to the problem of

making my nature and my requirements known. To advertise myself as a calculating, tool-making creature seemed to me the best approach. I conceived a plan, and rummaging through the junk and scrap I gathered together the material I needed and set to work.

In an hour or two I had made my Arithmetical Demonstrator. It consisted of a circular board around whose circumference I had marked, with a soft chalk-like substance I found, the numbers One to Twenty-Five in dot notation, so that any sighted intelligent creature anywhere in creation could have recognised them. Pinned to the centre of the board were two pointers each of a different shape, so that the whole affair looked much like a clock.

The Demonstrator was simple to operate. With the first hand I would point to two numbers successively, and then point to their sum with the second hand. Once I had caught the attention of the Bees in this way I would write the addition sign on the board, then write the multiplication sign and perform a few simple multiplications. In the same manner I would also be able to demonstrate subtraction and division and leave the Bees in no doubt as to my rationality.

Sitting halfway up the junkheap, I practised with the completed board for a short while. Suddenly the sound of dislodged rubbish close behind me made me jump. Turning, I saw that the Fly had descended furtively on me from the top of the heap and its head was craned forward in what I took to be a menacing manner.

In my alarm I half-rolled, half-scrambled down the heap, forgetting all about the demonstration board and trying to think where I had left my spear. The Fly made no attempt to follow me, however. When I next saw it, about ten minutes later, it had climbed down the far side of the heap and was squatting on the ground as if preoccupied. To my exasperation I saw that it was in possession of my Arithmetical Demonstrator.

Having found my spear I decided to use the Fly's own tactic against it to recover the board. Carefully, making as little noise as possible, I skirted round the heap and climbed up it on all fours so as to bring myself above and behind the Fly. Then I began a stealthy descent, reasoning that a noisy attack at close quarters would be enough to scare the insect into abandoning the board just as I had done.

Less deftly than the Fly I climbed to within a few feet of it. Its hearing did not seem particularly acute: it took no

notice of my less than silent approach. But before I launched on onslaught I noticed something purposeful about the movement of its foreleg and stayed my hand.

The Fly was playing with the Demonstrator, displaying computations on it exactly as I had intended.

On each occasion it moved the first pointer twice and the second pointer once.

Five and Eight equals Thirteen. Addition.

Four and Six equals Twenty-Four. Multiplication.

The fourth or fifth manipulation I observed made me think at first that these results were coincidental. Two and Three equals Eight. Incorrect.

Then it struck me. Two to the *power* Three equals Eight!

My amazement, not to say bewilderment, was so great that the spear dropped from my hand. I could not doubt but that the Fly, too, possessed intellectual power.

Here was my introduction to the Bees!

But why was the Fly, if it belonged to an intelligent species, living the life of a scavenger? Was it perhaps trapped in the Hive, as I was? Or was *every* insect species on Handrea intelligent, as a matter of course?

I slithered to the ground and stood near the Fly, forcing myself to disregard its powerful stench. It moved back but a few feet when I reached out my hand to pick up the demonstration board and regarded me intently as I spelled out the initial steps of our dialogue.

So began an incredible period of learning and interchange between my friend the Fly and myself. To be honest the learning was mostly on his part, for I could never have absorbed information as he did.

The Fly's memory was as rapid and unfaltering as a computer's. Everything I showed him he knew instantly. First I introduced him to the Arabic decimal notation and then, though he seemed content to rush into an orgy of abstruse calculation, I induced him to learn alphabetical writing. He mastered words and concepts with machine-like ease, and in the space of a few weeks we were able to converse on almost any subject, using an alphabetical version I made of the demonstration board.

My new friend's curiosity was prodigious. He asked me where I came from, and what was the size and distance of my home planet. He then asked how the spaceship that had

rought me here had been propelled, and I explained it to im as best as I was able. I also managed to elicit from him ne or two scraps of information about Handrea, though is answers were vague.

The Fly's chief obsession, however, lay in the mathematics of numbers. In this he was a wizard, possessing the ype of brain that the human race produces perhaps once in couple of centuries. I was never able to understand a raction of what the Fly knew about numbers. It would ave taken a Fermat or a Poincaré to keep up with him.

There was much wonderment in the thought of what trange vessels God chooses to imbue with his divine spark. had little enthusiasm, however, for exploring the more econdite properties of Fibonacci numbers, prime numbers nd the like, and as soon as was practicable I broached the subject that was the aim of the entire operation as far as I was concerned: would the Fly help me to establish relations with the Bees, so that I might persuade them to construct a rescue beacon for me?

While I posed this question on the alphabet board the Fly was hunched over the much improved number board. Although I was sure he read my request as I presented it to him he gave no sign of understanding it and continued playing with his own board.

Annoyed, I snatched the number board away from him and repeated my demand. The Fly squatted there, unmoving. As I was coming near the end of my letter-pointing he casually shuffled to the number-board again and continued his rapid calculations, which I believed concerned number curios of a high order but which I was in no position to follow without textual explanations.

I asked:

'Why will you not answer me?'

And was ignored.

I made increasingly desperate attempts at a closer accord and similarly was rebuffed, while the Fly continued his mathematical orgy in what looked increasingly like a frantic ecstasy. It suddenly occurred to me that up until my request for help none of our exchanges had been in the nature of true conversation but had consisted purely of an exchange of dry knowledge. Otherwise the Fly was behaving like someone who had not quite realised I existed – indeed, except for his obvious intelligence, like an idiot. Or a witless animal.

My failure to create a true relationship with the Fly was extremely disappointing. It taught me yet again how different was the intelligence of the Handreatic insects from my own. I concluded, after taking to the board for further attempts at a more personal contact, that I had been mistaken in thinking that the Fly was speaking to me when using the boards. Except for his initial enquiries into my origins he had been talking to himself, using the boards as a new toy or tool of thought.

So depressing was this reversal to my hopes that I felt unutterably weary. I reflected that I had wasted several weeks on what had proved to be a blind alley, and that if the Fly had rejected me as a fellow sentient being then so, probably, would the Bees. I dragged myself away from the busy insect, and flung myself down to sleep.

Otwun caught my arm and dragged me past the hovering Bee, whereupon normal perception returned to me. The Bee flew away and left us standing in the rain-sodden grass.

'What – what happened?' I asked dully.

'By accident you touched the mind of the Bee with your mind. It happens sometimes. Come, we must make haste if we are to arrive in time to take part in the assault against Totcune. Our Kessene allies will not wait indefinitely.'

I looked down at the arm he held. Unlike his arm, which was pale green, mine was a dark brown. Understanding for the first time that I also was a Handreatic I looked down at the whole of myself. My race was different from Otwun's. I was smaller, squat, like a goblin beside his lankness.

'Come.'

He noticed me gazing at the Hive. 'Men have sometimes entered the Hive to taste the Bees' honey,' he said. 'None have come out again, to my knowledge.'

'It would be a great adventure.'

'Only for a fool who no longer wishes to live.'

'Perhaps. Give my greetings to the Kessene.'

I moved away from him, walking slowly towards the Hive.

I had slept but a few minutes, and on waking found my mind buzzing with new energy.

The dream. I was sure the dream was telling me what to

do. I had taken the Bees too much for granted, not pondering enough as to their true nature. And yet all I had to do was to think about terrestrial bees.

The gathering of nectar was not the end of the bees' food-making process. That nectar was taken into the hive and made into honey. The same must be true, I reasoned, of the Bees of Handrea and their gathering of knowledge. That knowledge was further refined in the depths of the Hive. But what was the honey that resulted from this refining?

Men have sometimes entered the Hive to taste the Bees' honey.

The Bees of knowledge; the honey of experience. The phrase came into my mind, I did not know from where.

Of course! The answer came to me in a flash. It explained everything – why the Bees ignored me, why they pulled artefacts to pieces and abandoned them, apparently fashioning nothing similar themselves.

Social insects, as individuals, are not complete. They live only to serve the hive, or colony. Usually they are biologically specialised to perform specific functions and are oblivious of any other. Workers do not know sex. Drones do not know anything else.

The individual Bees I had encountered were not, by themselves, intelligent. What *was* intelligent was the *Hive Mind*, the collectivity of all the Bees, existing as some sort of separate entity. This Mind sent out its golden insects to bring back items of interest from the surrounding world. The Bees collected ideas and observations which were then mulled over by the Mind to provide itself with experience. Because the Hive Mind itself had no direct perception; everything had to come through the Bees.

Experience was the honey that was made from this dry, arid knowledge. It was the Hive Mind's food.

And it was the Hive Mind, not the individual Bees, that would understand my needs!

Could it have been the Hive Mind and not Saint Hysastum, I wondered, that had been calling to me through my dreams? At any rate my course of action seemed clear. I must descend deep into the Hive in search of the Mind, hoping that I could contact it somehow.

The Fly was still fiddling with the number board when, for the last time, I left the dim vault of the junkheaps. How close I was to the truth – and yet how far! Armed as usual

with my spear I set off, heading for the very centre of the Hive where I imagined the Mind to manifest itself

The damage caused by dragging the alien ship into the interior had all been repaired. The ceaselessly busy and largely inconsequential-looking activity of the giant insects went on all around me. The Bees rushed to and fro, buzz-saw voices rising and falling and wings trembling on meeting, or performed their odd waggling dance before one another. Except for their size and some physical differences it could have been any beehive on Earth.

I journeyed through the golden chambers I have already described. Beyond these lay a labyrinth of worm-like tunnels in which were interspersed empty egg-shaped chambers or nests. I discovered this to appertain to the Hive's reproductive arrangements, for eventually I entered a part of the labyrinth that was not empty. Here larvae crawled about the chambers, tended by worker Bees. Then I suddenly broke through the labyrinth and was confronted by an enormous honeycombed wall extending far overhead. Each cell of this honeycomb evidently contained an egg, for newly-hatched larvae were emerging here and there and crawling down the surface.

Somewhere, conceivably, was a huge bloated queen, mother to the whole Hive. Could this queen constitute the intelligence I sought? I rejected the idea. As among Earthly insects, she would be totally overburdened with her egg-laying role and unfit for anything else.

A longitudinal slit, about eight foot in height, separated the honeycomb from the ground. Since my destination lay in this direction I passed through it and walked, in semi-darkness, for a time with the bulk of the honeycomb pressing down above me.

Then the space seemed to open up abruptly and at the same time I was in the midst of a golden haze which intensified with each step I took, so that the limits of the place I was in were indistinct. Vague shapes loomed at me as if in a dream. Among them was the alien ship I had seen carried into the Hive, sliding past me as if into a mist.

My foot caught against something. The floor was littered with objects of all kinds so as to resemble the floor of the vault of the junkheaps, except that here they were bathed in the golden ambience covering everything. I went on, picking my way among them. Presently I heard a familiar buzzing sound. Ahead of me were a number of Bees that

appeared to be in an ecstatic trance. Their legs were rigid, their wings were open and vibrating tremulously, their antennae quivered, while the droning they gave off had an almost hypnotic effect.

During the course of my journey I had gradually become aware of an oppressive feeling in my head and an aching sensation at the bridge of my nose. These feelings became unbearably strong in the golden haze. I looked at the gathered Bees and understood that this was the place where their honey was processed, or perhaps where it was stored. With that thought the aching in my head became like a migraine and then suddenly vanished. Something pushed its way into my brain.

I tasted the Bees' honey. I experienced as the Bees experience.

The dream had been a precursor. But it could not have prepared me for such total immersion. What is experience? It comes through the senses, is processed by the mind and presented to the consciousness. The Bees' honey bypasses all these, except perhaps the last. It is raw experience, pre-digested, intensified, blotting out everything else.

This honey has an actual physical basis. It is magnetism. Handrea's magnetic field, as I have mentioned earlier, is unusually strong and intricate. The Bees have incorporated this magnetic intricacy into their evolution. By means of it they are able to perform a kind of telepathy on the creatures they borrow their knowledge from, using magnetic currents of great delicacy to read the memory banks of living minds. By tuning in to Handrea's magnetic field they know a great deal about what is taking place across the planet, and by the same means they can extend their knowledge into space within the limits of the field. Thus they knew of the accident aboard the passenger liner, and perhaps had learned much of mankind before I ever set foot on Handrea.

Sometimes magnetic strains from this golden interior store sweep through the Hive in wayward currents. Twice these currents had impinged on my mind to create dreams, giving me the information that had led me into this trap.

I do not know how long my first trance lasted. When it ended I found myself lying on the floor and understood that I must have been overwhelmed by the rush of impressions and passed out. Clarity of the senses lasted only a few

minutes, however. The magnetic furore swept through my brain again, and once more I was subjected to amazing experiences.

One does not lose consciousness during these trances. It is rather that one's normal perceptions are blotted out by a stronger force, as the light of a candle is annihilated by the light of the sun.

And what are these stronger experiences?

How am I to describe the contents of alien minds?

At first my experiences were almost wholly abstract, but possessing a baroque quality quite different from what one normally thinks of as abstract. When I try to recall them I am left with a sense of something golden and ornate, of sweetish-musk aromas and of depth within depth.

Like my friend the Fly the Bees are much interested in mathematics, but theirs is of a type that not even he would be able to understand (any more than I could, except intuitively when I was in the grip of the trance). What would he have made, with his obsession with numbers, of the Bees' theorem that there is a highest positive integer! To human mathematicians this would make no sense. The Bees' accomplish it by arranging all numbers radially on six spokes, centred about the number One. They then place on the spokes of this great wheel certain number series which are claimed to contain the essence of numbers and which go spiralling through it, diverging and converging in a winding dance. All these series meet at last in a single immense number. This, according to the theorem, is the opposite pole of the system of positive integers, of which One is the other pole, and is referred to as Hyper-One. This is the end of numbers as we know them. Hyper-One then serves as One for a number system of a higher order.

But, to show the hypothetical nature of the Bees' deliberations there is a quite contrary doctrine which portrays all numbers as emanating from a number Plenum, so that every number is potentially zero.

These are items, scraps, crumbs from the feast of the Bees' honey. The raw material of this honey is the knowledge and ideas that the individual Bees forage from all over Handrea. In the safety of their Hive the Bees get busy with this knowledge, converting it into direct experience. With the tirelessness of all insects they use it to create innumerable hypothetical worlds, testing them, as it were, with their prodigious intellects to see how they serve as vehicles for

xperience. I have lived in these worlds. When I am in them ney are as real as my own. I have tasted intellectual abstrac- ons of such a rarified nature that it is useless for me to try o think about them.

But as my brain began to accommodate itself to the honey ny experiences became more concrete. Instead of finding nyself in a realm of vast theoretical calculation I would find nyself sailing the seas of Handrea in a big ship, walking ities that lay somewhere on the other side of the globe, or articipating in historical events, many of which had taken lace thousands of years previously. Yet even here the Bees' intellectual preoccupations asserted themselves. Nearly lways the adventures I met ended in the studies of philo- ophers and mathematicians, where lengthy debate took lace, sometimes followed by translation into a world of ure ideas.

There was a third stage. My experiences began to include naterial that could only have come from my own brain. was back in my home city on my home planet. I was with ny friends and loved ones. I relived events from the past. None of this was as it has actually happened, but restruc- ured and mixed together and always with mingled emotions of joy, regret and nostalgia, as happens in dreams. In addition I lived fantastic scenes from fiction; even comic- strip caricatures came to life, as if the Bees did not know he difference between them and reality.

My own world came, perhaps, to be my own private corner of the honey-store, for it was certainly only a minor tem in the Bees' vast hoard. Yet what a sense of desolation I feel on coming out of it, in the periods when for some reason the magnetic currents no longer inflame my brain, and realise that it is only hallucination! Then I find myself in this arid, lonely place, with Bees buzzing and trembling all around me, and crawl from the chamber for near-by food and water, knowing that I shall never, in reality, see home again.

I have been here many years. My hair and beard are long and shaggy now that I no longer trim them. Often at the beginning I tried to break away from this addiction to the Bees' honey, but without it the reality of my position is simply too unbearable. Once I even dragged myself halfway back to the vault of the junkheaps again, but I knew all the time that I would be forced to return, so great is the pull of those waking dreams.

The time is long past, of course, when a rescue beacon could do anything to help me. Not that there was ever any chance of constructing one. Because the Bees are not intelligent.

Incredibly, but truly, they are not intelligent. They have intellect merely, pure intellect, but not intelligence, for this requires the exertion both of the intellect and of the feelings – and of the soul. The Bees have no feelings, any more than any insect has, and – of this I am convinced – God has not endowed them with souls.

They are insects, merely. Their intellectual powers, their avid thirst for knowledge, are but instincts with them, like the instinct that prompts them to feats of engineering and which, in the past, has also misled men into thinking the ants, termites and bees of Earth to be intelligent. No rational mind, able to respond to and communicate with other rational minds, lies behind their voracious appetite.

It seems fitting that if by some accident or quirk of nature intellectual brains should evolve in that class of creature roughly corresponding to our terrestrial arthropods (and Handrea offers the only case of this as far as I know, even though insect-like fauna are abundant throughout the universe) they should do so in this bizarre fashion. One does not expect insects to be intelligent, and indeed they are not, even when endowed with analytical powers greater than our own.

But how long it took me to grasp this fact when I strove so desperately to convey messages to the Hive Mind! For there *is* a Hive Mind; but it has no qualities or intelligence that an individual Bee does not have. It is merely an insect collectivised, a single Bee writ large, and would not be worth mentioning were it not for one curious power it has, or that I think it has.

It seems able by some means I cannot explain to congeal objects out of thought. Perhaps they are imprinted on matter by magnetism. At any rate several times I have found in the chamber small artefacts which earlier I had encountered in visions, and which I do not think could have been obtained on Handrea. Once, for instance, I found a copy of a newspaper, including in its pages the adventures of the Amazing Human Spider.

For all the abstract knowledge available to me my grip on concrete reality has steadily deteriorated. I can no longer say with certainty which of the experiences given me by the

noney really happened in my former life and which are lterations, interpolations or fantasies. For instance, was I eally a companion of the Amazing Human Spider, a crime-ighter who leaps from skyscraper to skyscraper by means of his gravity-defying web?

Recently I discovered a small bound book in which was written all the events I have outlined in this account.

I do not know whether I have copied my story from this book, or whether the book was copied by the Bees from my mind.

What does it matter? I do not know for certain if the book, or any of the other objects I found in the chamber, really existed.

And so here I remain and must remain, more a parasite upon these monsters than I ever had imagined I could be. For monsters they are – monsters in the Satanic sense. How else can one describe creatures of such prodigious knowledge and such negligible understanding? And for my enjoyment I have this honey – this all-spanning knowledge. Mad knowledge, too great for human encompassing and fit only for these manic Bees and the work of their ceaseless insect intellects. It is knowledge that has no meaning, nothing to check or illuminate it, and which produces no practical end.

Only one true solace is left to me: I know that even here, amid the unseeing Bees of Handrea, far from the temples and comforts of my religion, God is present.

BUILDING BLOCKS

PETER JOBLING

The lights were on in the town but no one ever called on me. I had Anaximander, of course, but there is no substitute for people.

Anaximander was rainbow-hued, which means that he was any colour you thought he was, and he had two backbones, one dorsal, one ventral, and accordion pleats in place of true ribs. We got on very well, but his spongy platelets were no substitute for a girl's waist.

I looked out of the window. The lights crossed the whole of the western skyline but there wasn't a soul out walking on the dunes or down on the beach. An hour earlier I had thought I heard a girl laugh – the sort of laugh girl friends reserve for their boy friends – but I must have been mistaken. The sea is full of sounds. No one could distinguish them all.

Anaximander raised his flat head against the palm of my hand. He liked to be stroked. He knew when I needed to be distracted. He knew how long I stayed in a grey mood once it began. He tugged my sleeve and *hooped* sadly and persistently. He wanted to go out. That suited me.

The night air should do me good, and there was always work to be done. When a town has only one architect and one archaeologist, and they are both me, there is always plenty of work to be done.

There was a lot of light even before I reached the bridge and the edge of town. Moon was high in the sky and at this time of the month she was only partially eclipsed, and not often, by the frantic orbit of her daughter Moonlet. Cheese, our lonely third satellite, was full but as usual no brighter

than dirty water in a tar barrel: never depend on Cheese when the lights go out, I always say.

The streets were empty. Anaximander was untroubled by it, but I found the clang of my shoes disconcerting. I half expected some irate citizen to throw up a window and bellow: 'Shut that row!' But none of them did. All sound asleep, I suppose.

We arrived at the Minster. I switched on the day-lights and we strolled across to the trenches at the east end. I could have used the machine, which stood over by the churchyard wall, but instead I took a trowel and a brush and began to unearth the old levels myself. I knew it was wrong, because the machine can process everything from pollen and carbon-14 to palaeomagnetism and stress and bed patterns; but I needed to do something *myself*. Why should the machine have all the fun?

We were already down to the Anglo-Saxon foundations. I was sure that this would prove to be the oldest part of the Minster site so I wanted to excavate it thoroughly before any new building was started. If I did not do it now no one else would have the chance for centuries.

It was not an easy dig. Those 'foundations' that I mentioned were actually robbed trenches. Every trace of the original building material had been removed, and the trenches themselves were packed with virgin earth.

While Anaximander hiccupped his *hoophoophoop* from half-way up the day-lights trellis I instructed the machine to dig deeper: I'd had my fun, but an entirely new level was much too important for me to ruin by myself.

Below the rectangular grid of Saxon trenches lay the remains of an oval building. None of the building material remained, but the dimensions were perfectly clear.

What, I asked Anaximander, was an oval chapel doing under the Saxon chancel?

Anaximander said: '*Hoophoophoop*,' and skipped on to my shoulder to watch.

The Moons coiled their way across the sky. Cheese had set but no one would have known without searching the sky carefully.

Again I thought I heard a voice but it was only the mewing of a beetle-crusher, one eye at the tip of each sail, searching the dark earth for insects with all the benefits which parallax could offer.

Was the oval the site of a first Saxon chapel or did it con-

firm the existence of an even earlier pagan sanctuary?

The sky brightened in the east but we carried on. The daylights slowly faded as the sun reached over the horizon. Anaximander fell asleep on my shoulder and fell off. He didn't hurt that easily, though.

Under the oval we found post holes and *their* infilling told us what we wanted to know. A wooden building had been dismantled and the holes neatly filled with rubble from a stone marker. I tried to piece it together but the lettering was badly eroded; it was like attempting a jigsaw puzzle which had lost most of its picture.

The machine took over.

Everything is a product of its individual history. Before Cress, you could tell a man's age and his position in society (more or less) by the extent to which his environment stunted his growth, bowed his shoulders, wrinkled and scarred his skin, potted his belly and broke his bones.

A stone is as informative if you know how to interrogate it. Even a child can tell you that a piece of coal is a record of a particular type of vegetation, suited to a particular climate, and spread over thousands of square miles and millions of years.

Every stone records within it the manner of its creation and the tectonic stresses to which it has been subjected. The mason's tool which shatters its surface also transmits compression waves to its interior. The stone registers the direction and force of every blow. Though that stone be afterwards broken, every fragment will contain a record of what has happened. The bigger the piece the easier the reconstruction, but theoretically a complete planet could be rebuilt from the evidence provided by a single grain of sand.

So the machine read the stresses, predicted the lie of the lost beds and interfaces, and the direction and force of chisel strokes, compared all the predictions from all the fragments, picked out the significant ones, and rebuilt the original marker by cold-spraying molecules of all the right types into all the right places.

It looks like erosion in reverse: you can't see the spray but you can see the surface growing. You must watch, of course, or the stupid machine will go on past the carved surface you find interesting and restore the scappled block from the quarry – or even try, with less and less accuracy, to restore the whole bed of rock which existed before the stone was quarried.

I stopped it in time.

The marker read: 'NEW WINCHESTER 1.'

Silly isn't it? We still call the planet *New* Winchester today!

The marker told us nothing about the nature of the timber hut, or whether the oval building was a chapel.

The answer was: go on digging.

Immediately under the post holes there was nothing to interest me.

First there was a level of black soil filled with humus. It was less than a thousand years old.

Under that, three feet of gravel overlay river sand. These layers had lain undisturbed for five thousand years. There were no artefacts.

Next, there was sterile earth, and below that four feet of coarse black sandstone.

Next: eighteen feet of oolitic limestone.

Next: an oily oozy shale which continually flooded the excavations, so that we had to give up.

It was all so maddeningly inconclusive.

I was forced to sit down at last, to get my breath. The sun was low in the sky again and I had not eaten. I took something out of my pocket and chewed it while Anaximander hopped over and sat on my knee.

The sun set before we moved. Moon and Moonlet were visible again, but I could not yet see the stars. There aren't many in this part of the galaxy. It's a bald patch.

The skies of my youth were filled with stars. Anaximander never saw such skies. It was a beautiful planet, Winchester, where I was born.

I wondered if Jessie remembered the last time we sat together above Basalt Falls.

The rock was hot from the sun. Sixma Jessie and I were resting after loving. I laid my chin on the edge of the granite and watched the mile-high ribbon of water turn to mist over Rainwood. Jessie rolled over on her stomach beside me. Her breasts rested gently on the stone and I slid my arm under them as a cushion.

'Not bad breasts for an old woman,' I said, kissing them.

'I'm younger than you are, sixma or not!' she retorted. 'You're at least twenty-two. I came out of the Cress only a

month ago so that switches *me* back to a physical age of *twenty*. Louse.'

It's always nice to know that Cress is there, available when you reach your fortieth birthday, and every twenty years after that; but it is also annoying to think that I'll never ever catch up with a woman six generations older than I am!

'What'll it be like, Kimon,' she said, rolling over and staring into the deep blue of the sky, 'what'll it be like when an Earth-worlder ship finds our beacon and homes in on us?'

'A hell of a lot nicer,' I said, 'than the day a Plate ship homes in on us and kills the whole colony.'

She pulled me close to her at the mention of the Plate. I hoped she would do that.

'The Plate,' she whispered. 'Shut up about the Plate. Their heads are as smooth as marbles. I don't really believe in them, do you?'

I kissed her. 'Just Bogey-Men,' I said.

'I'd be sick if I met one.'

'You'd be dead if you met one.'

'You know what I mean.'

'You know what *I* mean. You know, I find it just as hard to believe in our own people living up there among the stars. Can you really believe in tiny dots of planets out there, buzzing with Earth-worlder people like a lot of hives?'

Jessie burrowed her face into my chest and said nothing.

A blue dot scooted across the sky with a whine and we leapt apart like the wings of a spring-seed in autumn.

I laughed. 'It's not a Plate ship. It's only a parachute lizard.'

I cupped her breasts in my hands but she disengaged and looked down into the valley, trying to see through the blue distance.

I pointed to a flying fish spiralling up through the waters of the Fall, seeking the river's source so that it could lay its thousands of grey eggs. She took no notice.

'You'd think there were no other people on this planet,' she said.

'A few thousand can't hope to cover a planet. We've only been here ten generations.' I laughed: 'You're practically an oldest inhabitant.'

'I sometimes wish I was. It must have been weird coming down here in the pioneer ship—'

'Damaged, when surveyor-one crunched into surveyor-two while they were in orbit—'

'Unable to see what the weather was like at the bottom of the atmosphere—'

'Hitting a hurricane a thousand miles out to sea and just making it to land—'

'And ploughing The Groove ten miles long and fifty feet deep all the way up Settlement Valley.'

'They must use tough metal for pioneer ships.'

'Anyone can see that, Kimon. It's just as bright now as the day it was built.'

'Pity the works inside weren't as tough,' I grunted. 'Then we wouldn't have to wait all these years for the light beacon to pass on our distress signal—'

'—leaving us wondering if the Plate will find us first.'

We left the rock and strapped ourselves on to the glider. The sun reflected in the soap-bubble membrane of the wings as we wobbled down the grassy slope and soared out over Basalt Falls, a mile straight up above Rainwood.

The air was cool as mountain water but there was no wind. A parachute lizard kept pace with us for a moment, then dropped below. Rock-cattle moved about on the cliffs bordering the Falls. We aimed for the rising air over Baked Rock and soared over a ridge into Settlement Valley. The Groove was green and eroded after centuries of weathering, but still as bold and easy to follow as ever. The old Ship glowed like a mirror in the late evening sunlight.

Jessie said: 'There's *two* ships!'

There were *two* glowing mirrors at the head of the valley.

'We've been found, Kimon.'

My stomach jolted. I left unsaid the thought: if this is the Plate they've already seen us.

We landed. It was not the Plate, but it was no less The End of The World for that.

Threepa Jameson was standing on the edge of the crowd when we arrived. Just about everybody was there ahead of us.

He was excited, but grave: 'We've got to pick up our bags and go. It's an army ship. It never even saw our beacon: it must have bust on its way into orbit. The Plate's coming this way. Winchester's going to be in the Front Line. An army post. No civilians. We've got to go.'

Anaximander jumped off my shoulder and chased a ground-owl. Nothing and nobody can catch a ground-owl, but Anaximander ignored all advice.

The ground-owl escaped down a hole. I could hear it hooting in triumph far underground.

On this side of the town the Roman Gate still performs its ancient function. They built to last in those days. The mediaeval Cripple Gate, on the west, is in a far worse condition. Stone Street leads from Roman Gate to Graeme Belinda Knox Square, where the Rathaus stands.

I waved to the statues of Sir Winston and King Alfred in their fantastic archaic clothes and entered the narrow dogleg alley – it's hardly a street – called Silver Street. I imagined the smiths sitting there beating out cups and bowls, but it's all big glass windows and department stores nowadays.

I don't like the glass bridge which spans the river, but it's the only way home. You go between the factories – all machines and no workers – and you wonder how a transparent film as thin as paper could support a human being, never mind a loaded transporter. I prefer solid old-fashioned materials that *look* strong.

Once across the bridge and over the dunes I was home. I like the solitude of the pioneer ship. Not the Winchester one, you know. I mustn't confuse you. No, the New Winchester one.

The off-shore wind was piling up sand against the seaward side of the ship and no one seemed to care but me. Don't people value their heritage any more?

I approached the ship from the propulsion end. It is as incapable of taking off as the one which probably still lies at my birthplace.

A huge cone of fulgurite, sand which was melted by the landing tubes, completely encases the end of the vessel and extends out across the dunes for a hundred yards. It is not easy to chip pure silica out of a ship's tubes, and flushing it out would blow the ship and half the continent into orbit – in pieces.

I took off my hat and watched the moonlight soak through the translucent silica and, deep inside, the red-brown beads of iron oxide, and the cords of cobalt blue. I wept and wept. Poor Jessie. Poor Rhamptha.

Anaximander wriggled free and darted over the dunes after a ground-owl. I went into the ship and slammed the door and fell asleep almost immediately.

I did not remain asleep. Something woke me. Some sound or vibration must have penetrated the hull of the ship and wakened me. I turned over and over, sleepless now. I thought of the happy times Jessie and I had spent together. I thought of my adolescence and my first venture into the Girlhouse.

I had stripped naked in my bedroom and waited for the family to settle down. No one saw me leave the garden and crawl down to the river. No one saw me drift downstream with only my nose above the surface. I slid out by the clump of midnight-blue trees and crawled through long grass to the garden of Eightaunt Philomena. It was a long way round but anybody who was on the look-out for me would be waiting elsewhere, I guessed.

The final stretch was moonlit and difficult to cross. I should have to sprint and hope for help at the other side.

I ran one pace and a shout went up. Then I realised it wasn't me that had been seen, but some other lad. I was still in shadow. Three men grabbed the naked youth who had so nearly been me and bore him off in triumph to spend twenty-four hours in the Idiot Seat in Middle Square. I took my chance and ran. The shouts must have roused the girls so I had no need to knock. A shutter swung back and I was hauled aboard.

'Hello,' said a voice, as I stood up.

'Hello, Rhamptha,' I said. 'Fancy meeting you!'

She roared: 'Look, girls, a satyr. The least we can do is teach him what it's for.'

Rhamptha taught me what it's for. She had a body like a golf course, when whe was lying down. I risked the Idiot Seat many times after that. The times I was caught were worth it.

Poor Rhamptha. She had breasts like melons and a stomach like a trampoline. Poor Rhamptha.

I could not sleep. I reached out for the sleeping form of Anaximander but could not feel him anywhere on the bed. I searched the ship before I remembered. Of course, I must have locked him out.

I opened the door and shivered. Fog clung to the water and the sand of the dunes was dark with moisture. Every ten

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seconds the foghorn brayed from a buoy in the estuary.

'Anaximander!' I called. The only answer was the horn and the faint lapping of a windless tide. My footprints were firm in the fog-damp sand as I circled the ship.

I shouted in horror. Anaximander looked as if he had been trampled by a cart horse. His torn body resembled a broken umbrella.

My only real friend, and a dune runner had got him.

I collected his remains in a box. The foghorn blew as I sealed the lid and carried him away.

I buried him under the nearer edge of the fulgurite cone, at a spot where iron red and cobalt blue ran together. It was most fitting. I threw myself down and wept. I cried for Jessie and I cried for Rhamptha and I cried for Anaximander, and I cried for the insensible hardness of life.

The horn was still blowing as I stood up and trudged into the town. I muffled the parish church bell and set it booming slow and deep through the long, grey day. It was a day when the whole world mourned with me.

I returned to the Minster. A black pool of oily sludge hid my excavations. I was no longer interested in the archaeological levels that might hide beneath it. I covered the bottom of the pit with earth and the machine heat-pressed it into an impervious slate.

I fed my new drawings into the draughting head and sat back to watch.

The machine filled the deep pit and dug trenches for the foundations of the new Lady Chapel. It cut out the east end of the Norman chancel and incorporated the old stones in the new foundations: I prefer to leave clues for archaeologists who might dig the site in the future.

The walls and buttresses of the new chapel began to rise. When it was complete it would more than double the length of the Norman chancel. While the first stage proceeded I fed in new instructions to the draughting head. The corbels holding the roof must be carved richly. I chose a French madonna for the most easterly of them, and all the rest I decided should be musicians, one with a rebec, another with bagpipes, a third with a portative organ. I sketched ideas for the stained-glass windows. One should be the Tree of Jessie, another the saintly Rhamptha, the third St Michael welcoming with his sword the poor bleeding soul of Anaximander.

I lounged against a tree and remembered the beginning

of my career as an architect, back home on Winchester. 'Old' Winchester, I suppose I should call it now.

My first building was a house within sight of Basalt Falls.

It was a different world. I know, a pun, but in *every* sense it *was* a different world.

All round me as I built there were children hooting and shouting and fighting and weeping and laughing and chasing. The baby crawled everywhere he shouldn't and nowhere he should.

In the evenings Fivema Rawlinson set out meals for at least twenty-five: flying fish caviar, tree-foods, roast beef, rama jellies, new bread. The lawn never even noticed our weight but continued to perambulate around its central anchorage so that all parts could absorb water from the corner spring. It took twenty minutes to complete a circuit.

No one could ask for a better view. At some time during the meal we all faced Basalt Falls; at others we looked straight through the rainbow. And as if the Falls weren't enough, there were the great furry glistening emeralds of Rainwood, with their great billowing diurnal phemer-flowers.

There'd be Grandma Pelike: I think she had the best buttocks on Old Winchester; Eightpa James with his yellow beard: he could climb to the head of the Falls in an hour or so and not be out of breath; Sixma Jessie: before I got to know her very well; Ala Helka, a sort of honorary tenpa who came with the ship but never had any children. (In her young days, before the voyage, Helka was credited with mothering and fathering innumerable children.)

There was always a crowd around me then.

I day-dreamed too long and had to run to adjust the machine. The stupid thing was *too* foolproof. I deliberately designed the south wall too thick and the north wall too thin and the fool machine corrected them. Where be the interest in that?

I overrode the draughting head and restored the original dimensions. *Now* there was a good chance that some day the double hammerbeam roof would bring down the north wall and then I could rebuild it in the Decorated style, and have a stone vault.

While the machine got on with the building I planted a hedge around the extension of the churchyard. It was a day for memories. I couldn't help remembering Eightpa Hawkins' topiary hedge of Southern Moss. It was a work of art, the only thing of its kind on the whole of Old Winchester.

Eightpa lost heart after the army ship landed. Within three weeks the moss bolted into seed and became an unrecognisable splodge spreading half-way across the road.

Ala Helka hung around the soldiers begging for news of the other Earthworlds – worlds which to us of the marooned generations were only as real as an article of faith. Certainly we believed in Earth and Ulysses and Attila and Churchill and the rest. But they were nonetheless figments of a machine's imagination, collective delusions of our living ancestors. Oh, we believed all right. We believed like children who suspect that Father Christmas isn't all he seems.

I think the Plate were easier to believe in. And yet – here were the army: strangers we had known by reputation ever since childhood.

Old Winchester began to seem a little unreal. I hesitated to dig into the soil, fearing that a few inches down I would hit the rotting canvas that held everything together.

They were bad months, those last ones.

I finished the hedge and noticed for the first time that the machine had parked itself by the church gate. The chapel was evidently complete.

I entered it by the side door and was appalled. This was no place in which to pray to God, Who sent His only begotten Son to Earth in the guise of a simple wood-smith!

The place was a Tophet, an abomination of idolatries! I took up a heavy maul and smashed the filthy goddess which paraded an unspeakable naked shameful brat. I beat the revelrous instruments from the paws of grinning homunculi and with a long pole shattered the vain glass which kept out light and cossetted superstition.

How can man purify his mind and concentrate on the Divinity when he is at every step distracted by temptations? At every turn I saw hedonism, sloth, vanity, corruption!

My blood coursed through my veins and I exulted, I glorified the Lord of Hosts as I cast down the tinselled

pseudo-saint Michael and his creeping serpent.

I stood amid the dross of vanities and flung out my arms and wept for the misguided souls who set corporeal magnificence above the cleansing of the heart.

It was like an orgasm.

The sun streamed in from the shattered windows and lit up my brow with a crown of spiritual ecstasy.

I ran out into the freshness of the air, God's truest chapel; I ran until I was exhausted, and I ran until I collapsed. I mortified the flesh, casting sand into my eyes and eating earth and hurling myself naked into stinging plants.

Fog laid a garment of droplets over my unconscious body and chilled me and wakened me. In the light of the Moons I struggled to my feet, clutching a cracked rib and barely able to see. Blood scored the lower part of my body. I ached. I was frozen, but between the legs I burnt still.

Back in the ship I mended with the help of the medication machinery.

A month passed. I could breathe without difficulty now. I had been lucky. An accident like that could have killed me. I would have to take more care next time I went out for a walk behind the dunes.

It was a long time since I had been into town. I wondered how they were getting on without me to build and dig, dig and build.

I took my time. I put off the journey several times, and then, when I did cross the bridge, I deliberately turned left and visited a district I hadn't been through for years.

Newtown, it was called. The dominating feature was the great Nash Terrace, an imposing and highly fashionable relic of grander, more imperial days.

I sniffed: the whole place needed repainting. The owners were too keen on making money and too close-fisted to spend any on amenities. They would defeat themselves eventually. The rain would get in and the whole terrace, national monument or not, would fall down about their ears.

I walked on. I needed a big site: what would nobody miss?

I looked at the police station: would I have to fill in a lot of forms if I wanted to demolish that? I laughed and moved on.

The site must be large I found the perfect place after a lot of searching. The present building was the head office of a bank and most obnoxiously built in the fragile-looking

Martian style known as Spider's Ionic. This was where I would build the biggest girl-shaped brothel in the world!

I fetched the machine and watched it absorb the bank – I wanted none of *its* remains cluttering up the new foundations.

Spider's Ionic may look weak but it's very tough. It took an hour to absorb, which must be a record.

I fed in the drawings and watched. The first elements of the design were the upper torso crowned by twin crystal domes – the breasts – topped by small red lanterns – the nipples.

A brick public house had to be demolished to make room for the great round mass of the head and the tropical creepers of the hair.

I left the machine humming away to itself and returned to the ship.

Anaximander was dead and I had forgotten to erect a monument to his memory. I spent days designing a tall obelisk and decided to erect it in Graeme Belinda Knox Square: where better?

Knox was a hero too: The First Man To Find An Earthworld Beyond The Stars.

Poor Anaximander, my only real friend! And now he was dead.

The machine aboard the ship made the obelisk for me and I loaded it aboard a hoverdeck.

As usual the glass bridge looked too weak to support the extra weight, but we entered the town without difficulty.

Entering was one thing. Proceeding was another. The first street was blocked by a diversion sign. So was the second. I turned sharply to the left and decided to detour via the Nash terrace.

I must have got a decimal place wrong. The brothel was bigger than I intended. The girl's body crossed the original site and the street beyond it. Her buttocks spread where six shops had stood, and her thighs rose high into the air, crowned by the knees.

From the knees her legs returned to the ground. I was able to travel down the street which remained passable in the triangular space beneath.

I had to see the feet. I guessed where they would be.

I was correct.

Numbers 80 to 110 of the Nash terrace were no more. Between the sheer walls of numbers 79 and 111 stood a pair

of huge, pink, mother-of-pearl-nailed feet with large brass-knockered doors set into the big toes and red lamps burning behind the fanlights.

I was furious. I turned about and headed for the Minster. That at least would remain a haven of calm.

For a long time I just stood still, paralysed with horror, at the entrance to the Lady Chapel. Where there had been peace, there was chaos. Where there had been beauty, there was destruction.

Vandals or puritans had shattered the great windows, beheaded the Madonna and Child, hammered the corbel musicians.

Scattered across the churchyard I found pieces of coloured glass: the face of Jessie, the head of Anaximander, the shoulder of Rhamptha. For a whole day I searched the floor of the chapel and the ground outside. I had to use all the cunning I had learnt as an archaeologist.

Some parts I never found. Perhaps they were reduced to powder. The Virgin's nose could not be found, neither could the blessing fingertips of the Child.

The windows were releaded and cobbled and hopefully re-erected, but Anaximander was now barely recognisable.

I was glad I had the obelisk to remember him by. But it was too late to set it up that day. I climbed aboard the hoverdeck and returned to the ship by way of the Newtown diversions.

The ruination of Nash Terrace was my fault. I should have to apologise.

I knocked at the door of No. 79. There was no answer. I went past the great mocking toes of the giantess and knocked on the brass knocker of No. 111. I put my ear to the letterbox but could hear no footsteps.

There was no answer.

I returned to the hoverdeck, then dismounted again. I stood in front of the door of the brothel and raised my hand to knock. Then I lost my nerve, ran back to the hoverdeck and speeded home.

The next morning I transported the obelisk to Graeme Belinda Knox Square.

It was a foolish choice of a site because there was an obelisk there already.

I walked around it, trying to trace an inscription. I found one but it was badly eroded. Centuries of wind and rain had reduced the lettering to a faint scribbled ripple on the south

face. My curiosity was aroused, so I called the machine from its place by the Minster and set it to compute and rebuild the lost words.

The shallow ripples separated into word groups and then into individual letter plots. Gradually the meanders tightened and became crisp-edged, and the surface plane of the stone reappeared, faintly indented by the marks of the mason's tools.

The machine withdrew. I had only allowed it to restore a single section of the obelisk, so the result was slightly ridiculous. The crisp, brand-new square base of the stone supported a much slimmer object rounded and licked like a child's stick of barley-sugar.

The chiselled grooves of the inscription trapped deep shadows and reflected bright sunlight. There was no doubting its meaning now.

– IN MEMORIAM –
TO THOSE PIONEERS
WHO DIED
AT THE HANDS OF THE PLATE
NEW WINCHESTER
YEAR ONE
DAY FOUR

If any inscription deserved to be restored it was this one yet nobody had cared but me. I cleaned a table at a near-by Autobar and dialled a sandwich and a pot of Old Winchester tea.

I stared across the square at the obelisk, thinking.

It was a long time ago. How many hundreds of years? And were they Earthworlder years or Old Winchester years or New Winchester years? I could not remember.

Killed by the Plate. The damned Plate. The Plate have no faces, just smooth heads like the knobs on brass bedsteads. It is said that their mouths are in the palms of their hands. It is said that they began, millions of years ago, as a sort of mobile sea anenome. It is said that if you cut one in halves they regenerate into two complete individuals.

The damned, murderous, murdering Plate!

The new pioneer ship was better than the one which crashlanded on Old Winchester. The Earthworlders had had several centuries in which to improve the design, so when

we were thrown off our home world by the army we had no reason to fear a second crash.

We decided to go so far from Old Winchester that the Plate would be unheard of. Even though we had faster-than-light capability we nevertheless voted to travel for a minimum of three months before beginning to search for a new home.

It was a wasted effort. The Plate empire must be like an octopus – perhaps the shape is a natural choice for them. We left one tentacle of influence, crossed light-year after light-year of neutral territory, and then fortuitously dropped back into normal space inside another tentacle.

The Earthworlders failed to warn us. Either they didn't know, or we weren't security cleared.

We landed safely on New Winchester. Remember that. There was no coincidence. No crash. No Groove. Not only did no one get killed, we even *gained* a life, for a baby was born to Threema Emma as we touched down. We joked that he was a native of the planet, and therefore already the Oldest Inhabitant. Emma said we should ask his permission to land, and the captain duly recorded the plea in his log.

I took off soon afterwards on a map-making mission. I was not the only one but I had the farthest to travel. I had drawn the antipodes out of the hat.

There is a fantastic island on the far side of this world. The ocean there is twelve miles deep but the island rises almost vertically from the sea bed and sticks three miles into the sky. I don't know how it was formed – it certainly hasn't any volcanic craters.

I poked around it for longer than I should have done. I played the geologist when I was only supposed to be a cartographer.

When I got back I was too late.

Too late.

The Plate had landed. Every last colonist – including the other cartographers – had been rounded up.

I don't know when they killed them. Perhaps they shot them and piled them in heaps. Perhaps they herded them like cattle, so that they were still alive, jostling, screaming, when the heat came on.

In the long dark winter nights it comes to me that they were herded, still alive, into that space behind the ship.

The Plate, with their weapons aimed and their heads glowing smooth as billiard balls or eggs or the backs of skulls.

Jessie and Rhamptha. Emma with the Oldest Inhabitant sucking at her swollen breast. Tenpa and Fivema and Grandma. Wenslaus the cartographer from number three surveyor.

The Plate laughing from the palms of their hands, two hateful voices from each individual laughing in unison.

The colonists hysterical, perhaps, or dumbly brave and uncomprehending. But they must have known.

And then the wash of flame from the tail of their own ship, and the blizzard of sand blown at it by the Plate ship so that silica melted and coated the aft end of the pioneer vessel with a jacket of glass.

Flesh burning away in a split second; the calcium of the bones fluxing and softening the near molten silica of the sand, making it puddle and run; the iron of the blood - of all that blood – some of it vaporising, some of it trapped within the silica like the brown glaze on a pot.

And from somewhere, perhaps within the engines of the ship itself – somewhere a component of cobalt oxidising and coursing through the bolt of glass like a burning web of deepest, translucent, purest blue.

The ship is an obelisk, a fallen memorial to all the people I ever knew, a glaze of sand ingeniously and capriciously fluxed and coloured and applied to the round vessel the planet the jewel of the sun New Winchester.

The Ancient Egyptians of Earth told how the god Khnum made Man on the potter's wheel. I tell of how Khnum took Man and placed him in the kiln and fired him.

There can be no doubt that the Plate were the killers of my people. They are called the Plate for one reason only: their ships are shaped like dinner plates. No human knows what *they* call themselves.

As I returned from my mapping mission I saw their ship tilt and fall upwards into the sky.

I wanted to follow them. I wanted to blast them in their own wake. But I could hardly have chased them in my own tiny vessel.

The Plate made no attempt to destroy the contents of the pioneer ship: why should they bother when every colonist was dead?

Every one except me.

I flew away and grizzled on a distant shore until my survey rations ran out. Then I returned and built a wooden hut well away from the ship, to the north of the present town.

In a moment of black humour I carved a milestone beside the front door: 'New Winchester 1 mile', it said. And at last I dared to return to the ship and inspect the stores and make up my mind what I was going to do with them, and New Winchester, and myself.

I got up now and walked out of the square. I didn't think about where I was going, but I could hardly miss the monstrous knee-caps and the red lanterns of the brothel. They were higher than the parish church steeple.

Buildings got bigger and bigger. Mentally I compared the brothel with the Rathaus and the Rathaus with the round stone igloo I designed and built when I was learning to use the machine. The comparisons were laughable.

The brothel was the biggest place in town. I entered the Nash terrace and knocked on both of the doors set into the big toes, but there was no answer. I knocked many times, louder and louder, but no one came. At last, losing my temper, I kicked the scarlet panels and the gold beading of one door and it immediately swung open. It had never been locked.

The foot was a vestibule as large as a dance hall. The floor was polished. On the walls hung Renoirs and Klimts and Schieles and Donatos. Red curtains hung from floor to ceiling between the paintings.

A statue of the Star-Spangled Venus occupied the centre of the floor.

Madame was not present, so I crossed the vestibule and climbed the deep-piled scarlet staircase which led to the knee. At the top large settees were gathered in a circle. Perfume hung in the air and the cushions were in disorder. The scent cloaked but did not hide the enticing acid odours of naked lovers who only moments before had separated and crawled away.

The settees were now unoccupied.

I descended the stair in the thigh and arrived in the body, which was divided into a maze of gigantic – and tiny – bedrooms and parlours.

The beds were the beds of Fragonard and Boucher, great downy worlds made not for sleep but sport. There were mirrors on the walls, on the floors, on the ceilings.

In a great golden frame I saw 'The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus', by Rubens. Nearby a huge photograph of an

Ancient Greek vase painting showed naked girls and short-tailed, pointed-eared satyrs with phalluses like claymores. While some of the girls were already being pierced to the heart their round-breasted colleagues were hunting satyrs of their own, or crouching over them, kissing them and caressing them with their tongues.

In a corridor, arranged like the stations of the cross, a sequence of stereos showed all the principal positions. Many were new to me.

A pool of many-hued fish occupied a site below the brothel's navel. Leaning over it sat the figure of a naked girl. She seemed to breathe, for her breast rose and fell. I touched her, and her lips formed into a smile and then a kiss. But I stepped aside. There lies madness.

Another statue sang to me and raised its arms to me and I opened a door and went another way.

The sheets were turned back, a film of night attire lay across a chair, and a golden hair lay in the indent of the pillow. I touched the place and it was still warm.

Behind the next door I found the great twin halls of the domed breasts, each bigger than the dome of St Peter's Museum in Rome.

I turned back and sprawled on the nearest bed. The pillow dripped white lace. I could smell the hot wonderful smell which meant I was holding Jessie naked in my arms.

I wept. I shouted with passion and lust and fury, and then I wept again.

Poor Jessie. What might she have been now? An eighty-ma? A centma? A thouma?

Cress would have kept her as young as I was, even after so many years.

I raised my head and looked into a mirror. Suddenly I saw the haggard features, the lines, the dark hoops around the eyes, the hollow cheeks, the grey receding tide of hair.

A new sort of shock struck me now. Morbid self-pity gave way before very real terror.

I was old!

The journey back to the ship was a frantic one. I found a door, then a corridor, then an exit, then a street, then the bridge, then the ship. I took wrong turnings many times, but I found the ship.

In the Cress laboratory the autocalendar ticked off the years. I was five years late. I was five years *OLD*!

How could twenty-five years pass so quickly, I wondered.

How could I become so pre-occupied with my work?

I undressed and stepped into the tank. The rim was badly worn. Once every twenty years I got in. Once every twenty years I climbed out. Somehow I had eroded the edge of the tank.

I lay down and pressed the button with my toe.

The button needed resurfacing.

The liquid sprayed down over me and welled up over me.

Slowly, over a period of many hours, I melted and reformed. Slowly I was unborn and reborn and taken through childhood, puberty and adolescence. At the physical age of twenty the tank emptied. Pure water bathed me. Hot air dried me. Warm air played over me for a further twenty hours while I slept.

I dreamt, but whether it was after I entered the tank, or before I left it, I cannot tell.

All the steroes I had ever seen of the original Earth passed before my eyes.

I saw the marble toes of St Peter worn down by the kisses of pilgrims. I saw the night stair of Hexham Abbey ground down by the bare feet of monks.

I saw the short, potbellied bodies of Toulouse-Lautrec's nude models, women who were old before their time, even in his primitive era. I saw the paupers of Victoria, in the drawings of Doré I saw the tiny people of the Ituri Forest.

And I saw a torch flare in daylight and thought I saw all my people die despite the physical perfection of their bodies.

When I awoke and scrambled out of the tank I walked out of the ship and stood naked in the sea watching the waves break over me until I became very cold.

I was hungry but I refused to eat. My new muscles were at once strong and untried. I swam out into the sea and then turned and let the tide carry me into the estuary of the river. I waded ashore near the glass bridge and trotted through the streets until I came to the glass brothel.

It was early morning so no one saw the naked figure passing from light to shadow and back to light again.

In the brothel I found a room of mirrors and examined myself from all sides. My new body looked perfect. Any girl would go wild over it. I flected and reflected into infinity. When I moved, an army of Greek gods moved. A Universe of heroes was at my command.

And no girl came.

No girl cared.

Not even the paid women cared, and they were *paid* to care.

I returned to the bed I had lain on before.

The scents were fresh. There was no doubt about it: Jessie had just left the room.

She had escaped the Plate, but for some reason would not show herself. The brass bedknobs made me shudder and I ran out of the room searching for Jessie.

I shouted for her, but she would not come out of hiding.

There was another room that reminded me of that other brothel, the adolescent Girl House.

Rhamptha had escaped too. This was her room. This was where she had lain only minutes earlier. Her buttocks had dinted the mattress *here*; her breasts had touched the folded-back sheet *here*. I could not resist kissing the sheets and pillow.

'Thamptha!' I shouted, but she would not answer.

I chased them through every room but could never quite catch them.

Back again in Jessie's room I wrote her a letter. I told her how much I loved her. I told her how much I wanted to hug her and kiss her and lie with her.

I folded it and laid it on the bedside table.

I looked wistfully at it, imagining her delight when she found it and discovered that I too had escaped the fire of the Plate. As I reached out to read it again, just to savour the delight at second hand, I heard a loud reverberating roar and realised that it was thunder.

As I entered the great double-domed hall a flash of lightning cast the shadows of the window mullions across the floor and across the furnishings. The thunder which followed had the staccato explosiveness of an anchor chain falling into a tin ship.

Storms can be exhilarating. I found the newel stair leading to the balcony around the base of one of the great glass breasts and I went outside and clung to it as the wind blasted darts of rain at me and tried to pull me outwards and down on to the hard earth a hundred feet below.

The clouds boiled. Above me the blackest clouds whirled about in a vast ear-splitting wind. Lightning crackled incessantly. I became deaf, blind, torn and soaked. I shouted into the gale, I sang, I defied all nature to pluck me from my perch.

In the end I surrendered. There was no breath left in me.

I unlatched the door and was bowled through it. So great was the rush of air that I could not close it again. Now sharp bullets of hail cut into my face and made me turn away. The door blew out of my hands, crashed violently against the wall and burst from its hinges. It cartwheeled over the narrow inner balcony and crashed to the floor far below.

The doorway became the mouthpiece of a monstrous wind instrument. Only a cathedral organ could have approached the sounds and the bone-aching vibrations that that gale produced. Only once have I heard a louder noise and that was when the Plate ship took off.

Such storms are as rare as that.

The gale tore into the dome and I retreated to the newel stair in the thickness of the wall. I considered descending and escaping to one of the inner bedrooms but I could barely cling to the brass rail at the top.

The dome was creaking and twisting like a tossed blanket. The lantern above jolted up and down like a buoy in a wild sea. Glass was grinding and splintering and crashing to the floor.

Using all my strength I forced myself down the stair. I could easily have leapt down it, but it was nearly impossible to negotiate it slowly enough to ensure that I got to the bottom alive.

Half-way down a violent concussion threw me off my feet. There was so much noise already that I expected to hear no more. Nevertheless I was aware of an appalling squealing, as though all the old iron bearings on Earth had suddenly run dry.

I clung to the stair and got to the bottom in one piece.

The breast was gone. Half of it had crashed inwards. The other half was lifted into the air and thrown across the town like a balloon.

Luckily for me I found a liftshaft at the bottom of the stair. The machinery of the door defeated the wind. I passed through the door and was able to close it firmly after me. I did not descend but stepped out of the other side into the undamaged bedroom section.

A pink and naked girl sculpture held out its arms and sang to me. I kicked it in the crutch and watched it fall into a pool of cobalt and iron fish. Its chest continued to rise and fall and I have no doubt that it continued to sing. At six feet I could no longer hear it for the wind.

I blessed the wind and cursed it.

I found silence and rest in the innermost chamber. Its walls were resilient and spherical and a deep deep red-black. It was a small room, a haven. I curled my naked limbs up to my cold and naked body; and having rolled into a ball, I slept.

I have no idea how long I slept. I awoke to a feeling of great peace and lay for a long time before I uncurled and stretched. The room was small but the walls were elastic and expanded as I reached out my feet and my hands and yawned loudly.

The door by which I had entered was sealed. I could get out only by squeezing through a tiny sphincter set into the curve of the wall at waist level.

I felt like a snake in oil as I burrowed into the warm, slippery, resilient tube that took the place of a corridor. It felt alive. The darkness was red rather than black.

Suddenly the walls contracted behind me like bands of muscle and propelled me forward explosively. I fell out on to the earth.

The door from which I had been ejected was now a tall closed slit in the wall, almost hidden by a great mass of golden-brown creeper. The buttocks of the brothel curved away from me on my right and my left.

I had come into the world naked, as befits the new-born.

The storm was over. The sun shone. A band of faint white cirrus stood over the horizon to remind New Winchester of the violence which had so recently departed.

I explored, knowing that the town had suffered a metamorphosis.

Apart from the dome of the breast the brothel was intact. It could be repaired. But the flying wreckage had been like a scythe. Twenty houses in the Nash terrace were now a jumble of broken walls and sagging, unsupported floor boards. Paper from the walls hung in swathes, like limp flags. Furniture and roof tiles littered the gardens beyond.

A gentle breeze carried the smell of smoke. I left Newtown by climbing over fallen trees and heaps of shattered slates and tiles.

In Old Street the thatched cottages had lost their roofs. Every door and window had burst as the wind tore through the rooms, battering the walls with the furniture.

I hoped no one had been killed or injured.

A fire burned in the centre of the town. I found the

Rathaus blazing like a torch, its fine Gothic carved façade already blackened and barely recognisable. I stood at the end of the square and watched it burn with all the simplicity and directness of a waxy cardboard box.

Streams of water poured into the flames from the autotender but they made no noticeable difference.

The main façade leaned slowly, and then quickly, and crashed into the street. The fire brightened as it became more visible. Inside, other walls fell.

The gables blew outwards, suddenly, like shells, as an explosion deep in the cellars sent bolts of flame high into the air.

I cannot imagine what the officials kept in the cellars: alcohol? heating fuel? but the fire increased in violence and further explosions rocked the town.

One piece of damage was an improvement: opposite the Rathaus was a vile trashy trendy clog and patten shop called The Boot Teak. It was totally destroyed.

When the fire had burnt low I inspected other parts of the town. As official architect I should have to organise the rebuilding programme.

Watergate and Pond Street were flooded. The Natural History Museum was half submerged. I waded and swam through the galleries. I believe I am the only person ever to swim through the belly of a whale, despite the legend of Jonah. (If it was not an Earthly cetacean, at least it was an ancient local equivalent.)

Out in the street disc fish duck-draked over the surface in pursuit of insects. One struck me a glancing blow on the thigh but the cut was not deep.

I got back on to firmer ground and dried myself on a large towel which was knotted in the branches of a small tree. I kept it as a cloak, now that the breeze was getting cooler.

The Minster had suffered badly in the storm. The tower and steeple had fallen into the south transept, demolishing it to the foundation. The north wall of the Lady Chapel had collapsed, bringing down the roof.

The Lady Chapel was not very old. I could not understand at first why it had collapsed so quickly. I did not have to look far. The north wall was far too thin. The design had been faulty from the start.

I decided that the old south wall could be retained, but the rest of the chapel would have to be completely renewed. I designed a grand new Decorated scheme, and realised that

if I took long enough over it I could probably build the upper sections in the even more advanced Perpendicular Gothic style. With luck I would be able to roof it with fan vaults. That would set the parish church people chattering!

The steeple and transept bored me so I simply roofed over the crossing and bricked up the transept arch. The ruins would act as useful buttresses.

The flood missed the Minster but washed away the parish church porch.

The statue of the Virgin of the Torch, which stands upon the altar there, had a face which reminded me of Jessie. Above her head, painted on the wall in iron oxide, I could just make out a faded Tree of Jesse.

I had to sit down and write her another letter. She would be sure to see it if I tucked it into the Bible which lay on the lectern. It lay open at the Song of Songs, but I closed it over the letter.

She would find it next time she called.

The next few years were busy ones. I erected my obelisk in Graeme Belinda Knox Square. An older obelisk, which had stood on the same spot, was felled by the great wind. I used the stones in my new flood defences.

I built a new suburb near the coast. People liked to get away from the town to breathe the sharp tang of the sea, but I never could stomach the name they gave the place: Belle-Ayre, indeed!

I restored the dome of the breast, but for some reason I set the new dome over a great tower.

One was so tall it was no use at all.

But the other had won many prizes.

I brought in the slow-growing serenity-trees from the southern hemisphere and planted them about the town. They establish themselves best on the sites of old forest fires, so I set a clump of saplings in the ruins of the Rathaus.

I rebuilt parts of the Minster: a brick wall opposite the single transept was in a dangerous condition, so I demolished it and built a second transept to the south.While excavating for the foundation I discovered the foundations of an earlier transept which had occupied the site.

That was a good day. The sun shone on my bronzed skin,

not yet a year out of the Cress, and I sat for a while under the trees we called Rathaus Clump, though I can't think why: the Rathaus was half a mile away, a tall tower of steel and glass.

The trees of Rathaus Clump were over two hundred feet high, blue-black rising to pale yellow-white at their crests, and some of the oldest things in the town.

Not far away was the obelisk set up in the first days of the colony. The inscription was no longer legible but it recorded the deaths of some of the earliest settlers. It's odd, about that obelisk. I couldn't help thinking it was four-sided when I was young. But there is no doubt that it now had six sides, weathered though they were.

I visited the parish church and had to reroof it and underpin the walls.

I left a note for Jessie on the lectern. I did think of tucking it into the Bible, but when I opened it I found that someone else had had the same idea. I tried to read the note but the paper was old and fell to pieces in my hands.

I left my letter on the altar, tucked in the hands of Our Lady of Torches.

Not long after this I visited an area which I had not seen for a long time. It was in bad repair – perhaps cable trouble had cut the district off from the autocare services of Rathaus Control?

There had been a time when floods affected the area but that was in the days when the river flowed near the town. It enters the sea over two miles further south nowadays and animals browse on the silted up channel it used to use.

I brought the machine to the area and dug into an interesting mound near the site of a track called Pond Street on old maps.

The site was a strange one. Below the tree roots and earth lay roofing tiles, so I guessed that the building which had once stood there had fallen in on itself. Immediately underneath I came upon fossil bones. Surely this was an archaeological level, I thought, not a geological one?

When I reconstructed the site I realised that the bones had been collected elsewhere and exhibited in a museum. This gave me an idea, and I built a new Museum near Rathaus Clump.

It must have been in the same year that I visited the ruins of the ancient Minster to the north of the town.

The Baroque spire still stood, and the south transept, but

the rest fell into ruins long ago. The west end could be traced in a dry summer, for then the grass burnt yellow over the buried stones.

The east end of the nave stood as a buttress to the tower and spire, and the springers of the fan vaults still jutted from a north wall which stood by itself beyond the knee-high remains of the chancel. I believe the vaults must once have spanned a Lady Chapel.

There was little I could usefully do at the ruin so I returned to the Old Bordello, a Venus-shaped building of great charm which stands by itself in an extensive park planted here and there with venerable serenity trees. The lakes team with fish and water fowl. I climbed to the balcony which surrounds the dome of the tower of the breast and looked out over the park. I chose a site between twin ponds and descended to the hall below.

I kissed the star-spangled Astarte as I passed and then stopped. It was time I wrote another letter to Jessie. She would think me most rude if I ignored her today.

The letter spoke of our forthcoming betrothal, and I tucked it between the ample thighs of the seated goddess.

I shouted: 'I've left you a letter, Jessie!' but she pretended not to hear.

The machine came at my call, once I had left the Bordello, and together we laid out the foundations of a new Lady Chapel. It was bigger than most cathedrals but I insisted on calling it a chapel. The whole of the Old Bordello, and the pioneer ship too, would have fitted into the nave and not even projected into the inner aisles.

I was forced to move one of the lakes more than a hundred yards, and even then the wall of the chapter house stood on the water's edge. The dome over the crossing was gilded with pure gold and the high altar was a solid block of gold, platinum and untarnishing silver.

When the last lamp had been hung, and the last tile laid in the floor, I switched on the great organ and stood in the central west doorway listening to it.

Oh, it was magnificent. Jessie crept up close to listen to the music, but she would not show herself.

When the sun set I switched off the organ so that the children of the town would not be kept awake.

As I walked home I called to Jessie and told her about our future together. She listened attentively but kept to the darkest shadows.

I called: 'Jessie! Jessie, my love?' and waited to hear her answering call: 'Yes, Kimon, I love you too,' but she was too shy and in consequence made no audible answer.

Back at the ship, which nestles amid low rolling hills a mile or so from the shore, I prepared for bed. Then, unable to sleep, I made an inspection of the cabins and stores.

The Cress tank was a disgrace. Some components were worn out, others looked as if an abrasive dust had been blasted over them for a long time. I had the whole laboratory stripped down, rebuilt and re-equipped.

It looked beautiful when it was finished. I could hardly wait to try it out when my next twenty years were up. I brushed my grey hair from my brow and noticed, through the window, that Moon and Moonlet were fading as the sun edged over the horizon.

I went to sleep before the disc had risen fully.

I had a stereo taken of myself today, for Kimon. I cannot find him but I am sure he will see it here in the Art Gallery, if he follows my tracks. I think he will admire my figure. My hair is long and golden, both on my head and over my pubis. My breasts are large and round but firmly seated with no crease or overfold where they meet the ribs. My nipples are neat and pink and obviously virginal. My stomach is flat, my thighs and buttocks well rounded but without an ounce of unnecessary fat.

I have written on the frame:

'To My Beloved Kimon.
There is No Other Man in My Life.
Love, Jessie.'

I have given up calling to him. Instead I will entice him with signs of my presence. When I bathe I leave the dress I was wearing by the water's edge and return naked to the ship. In the Bordello, which I know he visits, I write messages to him on the polished floors and on the looking glasses.

I got the machine to repaint the whole town in pinks and pale blues and white, so that he will know that a feminine personality is present.

I am something of an artist, with the machine's assistance, and I have painted myself nude and desirable, and erected the huge panel on the glass and steel façade of the ancient Rathaus.

In Knox Square I have erected a steatopygous image of the Great Mother. She stands before the tall mossy remains of an ancient museum.

I explored these ruins and was amazed to see the broad trunks of mature serenity trees protruding from a cage of fossil bones more than half buried in the wind-borne earth. The trees here are the tallest in the northern hemisphere. The oldest are in a Clump just outside the walls. Storms have broken their tops and whittled away their weaker boughs, but their trunks are over forty feet thick. They are practically fossils themselves, hard as steel and old as rock, only a few tufts of foliage here and there proclaiming that they still live.

I call the place The Blue-Black Forest Half As Old As Time. The soil between the roots is deep prussian blue and spongy, so rich in humus from fallen leaves that anything would grow here if only the sun could reach it.

I have carved a relief on a fallen giant which lies on the edge of the Clump. I tried to calculate the age of the trunk but had to give up because the centre had long since turned to dust.

How many years must have elapsed since that one was planted, I wonder?

The relief shows Adam and Eve separated by the sword of St Michael.

Someone, archangel or not, keeps us apart. I think Kimon will grasp the symbolism without much difficulty.

I find it very difficult to stop stroking the Adam figure now that it is finished. Serenity-wood grows so slowly that it has the texture of ivory or bronze. It has almost the feel of flesh, and being wood it is never cold.

Oh, to feel Kimon's hand upon my skin. The thought of it sets me on fire. My nipples become rigid and I break out in a sweat of desire.

Oh, to lie where Kimon lies; to stretch out beneath him and feel him boring into me with all his tender brute strength,

To wrap my arms . . . but he does not show himself. I read his letters, I see his shadow at night, a darker patch in a dark world, I call plaintively to him, but he will not approach.

Perhaps if I undress now and step into the bath, perhaps he will come to me and slide his firm hands into the water.

Kimon, Kimon, come to me.

Jessie *is* here. I was losing hope, but she is here. Last night I heard her footsteps as she ran across the hills to the north. Today I saw her portrait in the Gallery and her gigantic self-portrait suspended high above the town. I have seen her relief of Adam separated from Eve and I sympathise and am brought to tears by looking at it.

I have found her dresses by the lake and the sea, and her messages in lipstick written on the floor and mirrors of the Old Bordello.

I have written love letters to her, in dozens, and she has answered them at last.

The houses of the town look beautiful in their bright pastel tints. They remind me of wedding cakes.

They remind me so much of wedding cakes that I have demolished the relics of the Old Minster and begun to build there a new Wedding Minster.

In the Art Gallery there are now stereos of myself. In the Bordello I have set up an ithyphallic figure of myself which will raise its arms and whisper love-talk when it is touched.

I have written more letters and scattered them in every room in the building.

Tomorrow I shall search for her and find her.

After all these years Kimon has at last made a concerted effort to find me. There were times, in former years, when he wrote to me no more than once in five years, and even then he left the notes in places where I would never have looked for them.

I visited his huge Lady Chapel, between the twin lakes, today. He built it for me, though he pretended to dedicate it to the old Earthworlder Mother of Jason.

I have embroidered altarcloths for the side chapels and covers for the hassocks.

I have redesigned the dark little womb-room in the belly of the Old Bordello. Now it contains a double bed and I am making a lace canopy to be draped over it. I am hungry for his touch. I have caressed and ridden the ithyphallic doll but it is not like real flesh. He is my Adam and I am his Eve and no archangel should keep us apart.

Adam. Kimon. Adam. The great bed awaits you, but I

shall not mention it in my letters until I have seen you in the flesh.

I have one new idea: the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I shall cook him such a meal as he will remember all the rest of his days.

The smell of cooking food will fetch him.

I have eaten such a feast as I shall never forget, however long I live. Jessie is the finest cook New Winchester has ever known. I look forward to our wedding with increased love – and increased anxiety. The Wedding Minster is complete. The nave is a thousand yards long and the choir and retrochoir and Lady Chapel as many more. Like the English architects of Earth I have concentrated on the horizontal here, leaving vertical accents to the continentals among the citizenry.

I have left Jessie a letter explaining the purpose of the new Minster, and asking her to dress it for us.

Now I intend to return to the ship and bathe and attempt to surprise her in the galley, cooking.

Adam has built well. The Wedding Minster deserves the finest decoration a woman can provide. I have taken the stereos of myself and Adam and combined the images in a tapestry to hang above the high altar. It is one hundred and twenty feet high and a hundred yards wide and shows Adam impregnating Eve in the midday sunlight of Paradise. The fruits of the trees glisten above their heads but there is no apple and there is no serpent.

White satin ribbon festoons the nave and I have made a wedding dress for myself from the finest threads. The train is three thousand square yards of lace and floats effortlessly above the ground as I walk. Adam's morning suit is black silk, semi-transparent and to be worn next to the skin. I hope he will dare to wear it.

The bed is complete.

All is complete, except our meeting.

I found a meal which Jessie has prepared. It is like clay in my mouth, for she will not show herself.

I am wearing the wedding suit, as she wishes me to try it,

and I have found her wedding dress, though she thought to keep it hidden.

I searched everywhere, and so I found where she had hidden the bed intended for our honeymoon.

But where is she? Why does she taunt me this way?

What is the use of the bed, if she will not come?

The canopy tears as I reach up to kiss it, and I tear it into jagged spider's-web shreds and roar with the pain of loneliness. I fall upon the bed and weep. The suit tears as I remove it and I force myself through the sphincter, rupturing it, for the material has perished in the years which have passed since I last drew myself through it. The warmth and resilience of the passage have departed, and dust replaces the slick smoothness of other years.

I begin to suffocate in the enclosed space and have to fight and wrestle with the cracking walls as I try to escape. I have to kick and punch my way out of the exit, and after I have regained my feet I realise that I am knee-deep in weeds and the pubic creeper has fallen away and died, and the great labia of the narrow door are slack and broken and will not close again.

I run through the weeds. The buttocks are corroded and the tower of the breast at last shows over the curve of the belly, behind me. It is crooked now.

I cut my feet on glass from a fallen building but hardly notice. In the Lady Chapel between the two lakes I turn on the organ and leave it raging in its deepest, most reverberating tones.

I am leaving red footprints now but it does not matter.

I limp down the aisle of the Wedding Minster and light the candles on the High Altar.

Jessie has miscalculated. The tapestry starts to burn as I turn away to set the bells pealing the glad wedding tidings. I switch on the organ and stand in the nave watching the flames curl over the ritual of the coupling of naked man with naked woman.

The heat blisters my own naked hide but I cannot turn away. The bells ring out and the organ at full volume sets my skull vibrating until I can bear no more.

I remain where I am until the tapestry crashes to the floor and fragments of ash fly out at me, still incandescent. One piece falls upon my foot and I scream and run.

As I run I realise that the roof is burning, and that the lead cladding of the roof is melting.

It rains deadly silver drops of lead.

I reach the west doors. The pews are burning, set on fire by the molten metal. In a little while, if I care to watch, the steeple will fall into the crossing and the roof will fall and probably pull the walls down with it, for they are mostly window.

The organ stops suddenly. The bells have been silent for a long time, but I did not notice their absence until now.

In the distance the organ of the Lady Chapel plays, but I can only hear the throb of the deepest notes from here.

I collapse, injuring my leg as I fall.

When I regain consciousness I drag myself into the ship and lower myself into the Cress tank. A bone in my leg is broken, I think, but once in the Cress this will no longer matter.

With my good leg I stab the button which will start the rejuvenation process. The new tank works well, though its setting has never been checked since it was installed.

The liquid floods the tank and I begin to melt away. Instead of cells growing and dividing, they discharge half their mass as unwanted waste, and the remaining incomplete halves pair off to create whole cells which themselves proceed to dispose of half their volume.

I grow smaller, younger. I pass from adulthood to adolescence and from adolescence to childhood. No longer can my testicles pump sperm into the body of a woman. Jessie no longer would interest me sexually, if I met her now.

My cells shrink and flow together and shrink again. I leave childhood and enter infancy. My limbs grow shorter and the flesh piles up on them in rolls.

My body grows smaller still, and rounded, until it is little more than a clump of cells clinging to the end of an artificial umbilical cord. Throughout this process my brain remains unchanged, withdrawn behind a membrane, its only link with the rest of the embryo a fine filament of notochord.

The clump of cells no longer decreases. For several minutes it remains unchanged while the tank prepares for a new cycle.

My cells begin to grow and divide and multiply and become a recognisable embryo, with a detectable spine and the buds of limbs. I grow visibly, and am now big enough to *be* visible. My limb buds lengthen. My brain begins to settle once more into the growing body, though the head is disproportionately large.

My sex is not yet discernible but already the ovaries are starting to develop and the uterus is establishing its position. I reach the age of birth and grow fast. At the physical age of twelve my nipples swell and my breasts begin to thrust outwards, and hair grows in my armpits and over the firm flesh which hides my vagina. My hips broaden and my thighs become more rounded. My breasts continue to grow until they are large but as firm as fresh fruit. My hair is thick and golden, both upon my head and between my legs.

I sleep and grow.

The tank empties and instead of sleeping for many hours I awake immediately, before the hot sprays can wash me clean.

I climb out of the tank, still sticky from the rejuvenating fluid, and I run out of the ship into a dusty wind which coats my body with harsh grit.

'Adam!' I shout, tripping over a hidden rock and bruising and grazing myself badly.

A cut opens on my right breast and leaks blood into the dust and grit which sticks to me.

'Adam!' I scream now.

'Adam!'

I run on across the low hills.

Sometimes now I shout: 'Kimon!' At others, 'Adam!'

I run blindly, my breath harsh: 'Adam!' I scream. 'Adam! Adam!'

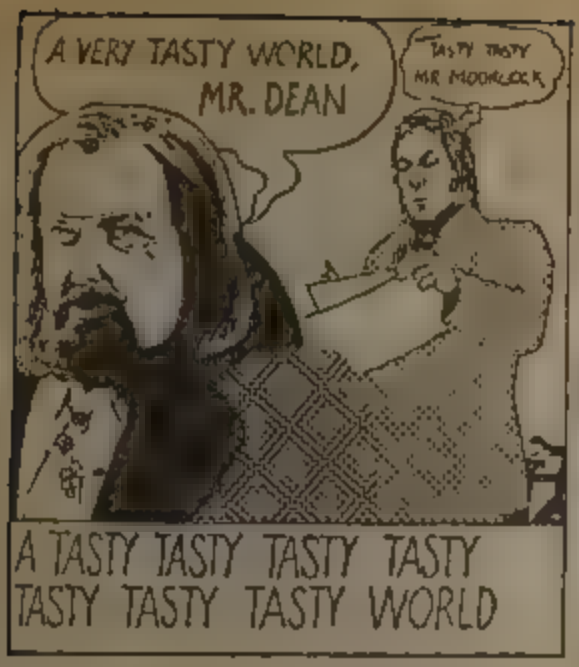
My feet are burnt by hot stones and twisted metal and cut by splintered timber.

'Adam!'

'Kimon!'

'Adam!'

I scream and I scream and I scream but he will not come out of his hiding place.



MAL DEAN

Mal Dean was born in Widnes, near Liverpool, in 1941 and between 1959 and 1961 studied at Liverpool Art School. He was part of that renaissance which, for a variety of reasons, seemed to stem from Liverpool in the 60s. He was associated with many of the Liverpool poets and, a musician himself, with jazz and rock performers. In many ways, however, Mal's inspiration as an artist came from his nostalgia for the recent past – he preferred jazz to rock; his idols were the great American jazzmen – the images in his paintings and cartoons were often drawn from World War II and he was influenced by graphic artists of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods – Tenniel and Heath Robinson and others. He was not merely talented, he was one of the most individual talents to come out of his time and, perhaps because of that, did not share the success which came to many of his contemporaries. He wasn't much good at compromising and almost everything he did was done on his own terms – illustration, record sleeves, painting, record reviews, cartoons and music – and, as a result, it was almost always vital, complex, sardonic, highly personal. He drew a regular cartoon each week for MELODY MAKER and those who knew about such things said that he had a great

new worlds

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gift for bringing out the essence of the performers who were often satirised but never cruelly – Mal was too subtle for that.

As an illustrator Mal could complement an author's work better than the majority of his rivals. He first came to NEW WORLDS as an illustrator in 1967 and among the best drawings he did were those for my own 'The Tank Trapeze' (one is reproduced here) and 'A Cure for Cancer' (since reprinted in the Penguin edition). He illustrated the first British edition of 'The Final Programme' and would have illustrated several other Jerry Cornelius books if he had lived.

From 1967 we were very grateful to have Mal working on NEW WORLDS. It was a happy coming together; he gave something to the magazine which, up to that time, it had lacked. We needed a skilful black and white artist who felt at ease with the kind of fiction we were publishing and who had the same respect for craftsmanship which we hoped we encouraged in our authors. There was intelligence, vitality and irony in Mal's work, but it was also highly disciplined. At his best his sense of black and white values equalled that of his masters, who included Mervyn Peake. When tired and overworked Mal could, occasionally, become self-indulgent, his pictures become too crowded, sensational, but this was because he had the special problems of any illustrator forced to produce work in someone else's time, to a deadline not his own, and glancing through the pages of NEW WORLDS it is surprising how rarely he produced unsatisfying work.

Mal also produced posters (an excellent one for the early Edgar Broughton Band), record sleeves (notably for Pete Brown's Battered Ornaments) and comic strips (chiefly published in IT). He illustrated two books of poems by his wife, Libby Houston, 'A Stained Glass Raree Show' and 'Plain Clothes'. His own book of cartoons, 'Black Dog', appeared in 1969. His chief interest as a painter in recent years was in painting life-size pictures of World War II aeroplanes – often taking only a detail and producing a strange, spare, splendid result. These were shown in 1972 in 'The War Machine' exhibition as part of the Islington Festival.

Sardonic, anecdotal, almost sentimental on subjects dear to his heart (Spitfires, for instance, or certain highlands and fells, Liverpool), he was fine company. His wit could be

caustic, but he was not above telling a very bad joke for the fun of it, and his stories were hilarious, particularly when they came from his own experience and observation.

Mal discovered he had cancer in 1973. His sister had just died from the same kind of cancer a few months previously. His courage in coping with the knowledge was extraordinary; he fought self-pity as hard as he fought to stay alive. Treatments were tried and failed. Gradually he became worse, but he would not give up. His bravery, cheerfulness and kindness at this time were astonishing and spoke

of a strength of character which was remarkable. In February 1974 he contracted pneumonia as a result of treatments which had weakened him. He was sent home from the hospital. The pneumonia grew worse. He died on February 24th, leaving his wife, Libby, and his two small children,

Sam and Alice. His personality lives on in the memories of his many friends. His talent, his generosity, his wit, are preserved for ever in his work.

Michael Moorcock

SLOW DRAG

MAL DEAN

NOTE: Mal Dean showed the following story to Michael Moorcock shortly before he died. Moorcock was enthusiastic about it and recommended it to the new editor of NEW WORLDS. After Mal's death we asked if we might publish the story, dedicated to him. Revised, it would have appeared in this issue in the ordinary way, had it been submitted by Mal.

I was wading through the teeth-high marge of a greasy spoon in the Holloway Road.

'This'll larn me to put a better face on my own egg, I thought, as I leaned to my left to deposit a side of greasy vomit down the hair and overall of the handiest waitress; it was the standard way of rejecting mine host's bill. Aware of his failings as a short-order chef, he reluctantly concurred. There was a high turnover in waitresses, but few words went wasted.

Stepping from the establishment, I was grasped by four powerful hands; with great speed and dexterity, my arms were twisted up behind my back in that grip famous throughout the grappling world as the half nelson - not a whole or full nelson, but two quite separate halves: my head was thrust forward and down to bootlace level and I was propelled rapidly along the pavement by unknown malefactors, my nose the small prow of my discomfited ship cutting a line through the top level of the filthy half-frozen street slush. In this distressing manner we headed sou'-sou'-east, crossing one street and the half of another, when an agonised yelp I recognised instantly as my own signalled

the cracking of my forehead against the opening rear offside door of a maroon Morris 1100. Further agony was fed down my two arms as my pilots disagreed upon which way to circumnavigate this obstacle, wrenched my arms this way and, even worse, that. Such a means of progression is fraught with perils. The unavoided broken milk-bottle took its toll. Pram nor pushchair passed my way but their axles, wheels or merry little occupants extracted further painful payment, metal and leather pitiless against my blameless and unguarded noddle.

I was becoming increasingly worried about my fountain-pen, an inexpensive but faithful article which had long rendered good service when treated in the manner born, but which might in its invert state at this very moment be slowly transferring its ammunition of watery blue ink from the rubber magazine, drop by drop, through the channel which feeds the patent nib into the white plastic cap, and thence, by way of the two-and-a-half turns of ill-fitting cap joint, out into a pocket filled to bursting with slivers of variously coloured and lined, and much folded, paper which had days, weeks and months before been vital lists: shopping, people to phone, areas to avoid, gramophone record matrix numbers – and there was my Last Tram in Liverpool ticket, a further cause for alarm. Immediately beyond this rich spoiling ground, the errant writing fluid would play old Harry with my blue, oatmeal and white ticking Union workshirt, fresh on the Monday but one previous: could it work its seeping way through those stout fibres? Perish the thought, for next step inwards was the precious 'Shuttleworth Trust' T-shirt with the Sopwith Pup screen print, which faded some eighteen percent for every washing and might take but two more whilst remaining legible.

Unhappy as I was with my preposterous pea-pushing posture, and so limited as I was in means of communication, the precious gift of observation was not yet altogether denied me. Although the view ahead was impossible, my nose, forehead and eventually entire bonce had pushed up a great bow wave of slush which, as the evening progressed and the air temperature suffered a sharp reduction, froze into a crusty hardness – it was yet, by dint of painful neck movements to the left and to the right, possible to see in each case to the rear of my mobile horizontal avalanche the feet of my propellers and the bottom eight degrees of the passing show.

It was increasingly apparent that attempts on my part to achieve physical domination of my assailant motive power were doomed to failure, as such strength as my stick-like arms and scarecrow wrists usually possessed was dissipated in the first twelve seconds of this encounter. If domination or, sod it, mere equation were somehow to be achieved, then all the mental forces I could muster behind my beetling brows and between my crimson and pale blue ears must be brought into action.

Ice was beginning to encrust the upper and lower lids of both left and right eyes: to lose all sight was a monkey I could scarcely contemplate upon my back. Certain aircraft which habitually fly in the severe icing conditions of high-altitude storms are fitted with inflatable panels of the strongest black rubber, these being laid strategically along the leading edges of the mainplanes (for the lay reader, the front edges of the wing) – the area of maximum icing. By dint of a mechanical pump, the pilot may direct previously heated air into and out of these panels, causing such stresses

in the crystalline structure of the newly-formed ice that it is obliged to crack and, in most cases, fall clean away. This desirable effect I attempted to emulate by strenuous fluttering of the eyelashes, rapid winking, powerful bouts of blinking and a programme of thunderous frowns and alternately swift raising of the eyebrows, as when displaying surprised delight, or amazed disbelief. This exhausting process bought but a few minutes' clarity of vision, during which I managed to absorb feature by feature the salients and gullies, outline and filling in, colour, texture, structure and material of manufacture of the foot and lower leg wear of the controller and abuser of my now totally numb left arm: then, by a jarring readjustment of brow to iceberg, the first eighteen inches up from the deck of the bastard who was twisting the shit out of my right arm, the upper and lower portions of which, now in reverse order of course – to wit, the wrist and bicep – were gripped by a pins-and-needles of unusually electric ferocity while the intervening elbow thought itself seared by the fires of hell.

Without warning, we stopped. The eccentric distribution of my various parts caused this process to manifest itself more disadvantageously than at almost any other time; my left foot, not receiving the order to halt until my face was pushed by the power of our sudden halt, the neck buckling through ninety degrees to the spine against the mountain of slush left my bob in the ideal position to receive my swinging left shoe full in it. Only the dilapidation and soddenness of the fabric of that inexpensive object saved lip, tooth, tongue, palate, jaws and windpipe from a sore pasting. Happily I thought 'Hurrah for the two-pound Polish desert boot' – the class of iron-shod British leather elastic-sided article I usually craved but could never afford, would have stoved me in from the conk to the beard on my chinny-chin-chin. In that moment I resolved ever to purchase only the cheapest possible footwear, and to stand for a minimum of twenty minutes in a bowl of tepid water, before setting foot from the safe haven of that bedstale, fixative and oxter-reeking room this particular Englishman regarded as his castle.

An uncertain stillness seemed to settle uncomfortably over these disordered proceedings. From my now immobile ankles, knees and hips came loud clicks like those from a locomotive on shed Saturday night, firebox raked off for still, silent Sunday. I clicked and ticked, clearly audible

shrinkage, cooling. My trousers, once proud naval serge now worn to near newsprint thinness (particularly at seat and knees), were no barrier to surface evaporation; my body heat was being squandered reckessly and I could do piss all, except for a few increasingly ineffectual breathing tricks, about it.

Whilst contemplating my predicament thus and making mental computation of my woes, I could feel the final dregs of appreciation and semi-ironic enjoyment leaking fugitively from the lower left corner of the frame, out of sight, out of mind, out of synch.

'Increasing doormats'; 'longitude'; 'cuntin' bastard gaffer's poxy-eyed daughter's shit-holin' Alsatian'; 'Cork and Orrery'; 'much board'; 'hundred and fifty watt'; 'kackal'; – the threshold of street sound was high, a Scania Vabis with grievous bodily big ends was stop-starting by in the clogged artery that is the A1 at this point. Nothing

moves more than a yard at a time among the myriad lost taxis and antique dealers' rickshaws. 'Gammon'; 'Number Three Court'; 'Warspite' – more fragments of traffic-broken sentences fell in unenlightening shrapnel about my ears. The words and phrases came from more voices than my limited vision of feet could decently account for. The accents of Tyneside, Cracow and Dublin seemed present; several women from inferior agricultural colleges in the mid-West brayed dismally about Bed and Breakfast in Kidderminster; chain-smoking nuns discussed supermarkets in Jungian terms; just before the inevitable fight broke out, my captors wheeled me hard aport and barged through the grumbling traffic, deeply denting the side of a furniture van and removing spokes from the wheels of several members of the Belgian Tour of Britain cycle race team who had become detached from the bunch near Rhyl and never looked back. The bumps, bruises, contusions and fresh blood this rash course had dealt to my skull, and the few remaining shreds of scalp, were beginning to occupy my thoughts, when, from the remaining open corner of my left eye, I recognised the lower portion of a familiar Art Nouveau motif built into a strong timber door; the pitted and indented brass kickplates fitted thereto glinted and winked dully, like old friends. With an immense effort I croaked in pleasure, 'The Library!'

THREE POEMS

LIBBY HOUSTON

Weather Clock

a clean and smooth hill
is gathered into a windmill.
under the glass the sails
throw out beams of light.

away round they go, backing
with the shift of the wind.
blue clouds keep their level
in dark still lines.

down on the green by the well
a man with white shirt plain as paper
bends and straightens while side by side
his pale fists turn the winch.

one way he winds, and then the other,
making the rope quiver.
the bucket reaches neither parapet
nor (by his ease) water.

I am watching and weighing.
I have compassed his trick.
I have not shown myself
and need not speak.

the glass is beginning to fall.
I shall smooth
my hair, my pinafore
to the door.

Ghost Bread

Last harvest a rich day
a clear night with stars,
I came home round with ale
and found ghost bread on my table.

Ghost bread is a grey bread
there on the table where no bread was,
nothing to taste or touch or smell
but when you die, you will die lacking.

The Queen Lies Dying

The Queen Lies Dying
(in damask ease):
flies tease her bodice
& her friends have all
gone to ground
(though their silks mould on

Out of the corner of her eye
she sees a small sticky drop
as she waits for it to drop
but it's not what the nurse sees
in her thick chambered position
(dreaming of her grandmother's baking days

News of the dire event
(which has not yet taken place
inside) outside brings
tears to the eyes of the multitude
(pouring in a torrent
over the lids & down to the gutter
& gone away

Welladay!
many days
(on Sundays
parishes are led to pray

That paragon
of unction
her successor
is her conqueror
has buried her
with the sceptre
for a crowbar:
'Riddled body riddled body *die*
(her head brims with stale desire
to wipe a clogged eye

CONVERSATIONS AT MA MAIA METRON

ROBERT MEADLEY

Faugh! Autumn barely and the corpses already shrivelling on the gibbets by the road. I stood in the frost before the two-towered gate. There was heavy rime on my moustache, and the smokey fret of my horses' breath splayed in long, dissolving cones that curved as their heads moved. At frequent intervals I struck the gong before the gate; not impatiently, but with the imperative tone proper to my office. After an hour the keeper, surly and perhaps a little drunk, opened the gate and let me through.

According to this keeper, a steep range of mountains obstructed the way to the next gate and the road was uncertain. For a fee however, two ingots of tin, he procured for me the services of a guide, a dismal young man of great height and little breadth who walked before me brandishing a scythe blade lashed to a stout pole and droning dull hymns extolling the current theogeny of the province. On his advice I left my horses and proceeded on foot, leading a pack ass. Further horses, he assured me, would be available beyond the mountains. It was not a comfortable walk.

The gate keeper, presumably through ignorance, had not exaggerated. The mountains were steep and craggy, and so thickly foliated that the wind, even among the heights, sounded far off, as if it were being carried, buffeting in a bag, by someone with large feet walking some distance ahead along the undecipherable path. After struggling through an interminable maze of fallen rocks, the roots of invisible trees and ravines choked with dense thickets, I followed my guide out of the undergrowth on to the sudden banks of a river in spate. Only two humped smears of foam showed where the pillars of the bridge remained.

The noise of the river, resounding among the mountains, rendered all other sounds inaudible, but by retreating a short distance into the squat jungle behind us, the guide was able to explain that, although the overwhelming of the bridge made progress impossible until the flood subsided, there was a monastery higher up the river where we might be offered hospitality while we waited. Which monastery we found, rather startlingly, suspended from one wall of a chasm at a point where, the mountain falling away abruptly in a sheer crag, the water shot out into the air with immense force in an arc whose radius stretched several men's height from the cliff; the whole scene misted with blurry traces of a rainbow despite the greyness of the day. Access to the monastery, by basket and tilting spiral stair, proved less perilous than one might have feared.

We were immediately accommodated by the monks, and offered as great a variety of quarters as the monotony of the view allowed. Hot water for a bath was brought to me as I changed, with afterwards a steaming dumpling plumped with prunes and walnuts, a whole honeycomb to break over it, and a quart jug of beer. It all seemed very civilised after the bitter exigencies of war and brutal taps of provincial caravanserai.

For dinner I was the guest of the abbot and senior monks at high table. My accoutrements and scars having already caused some comment when I arrived, I was now required by courtesy to give some recital of the seige at K——, my conduct of the defence, and the death of my daughter and expected grandchild through her conviction that both city and defence were illusory. This latter particularly excited more than polite amazement.

It was after dinner, when asked why he had earlier murmured abstractedly 'Although out of whose anus the river originally ran will not be resolved, some progress will be presumed in extending the enigmatic way', that the abbot affably invited us to join him in imagining a culture, stemming from a river valley, the first principle of whose mysteries is that the river, the source of arbitrary and absolute Life, first flowed from the anus of one of the gods. At an assumed point in time, the favourite candidate for this honour is the Serpent, whose popularity rests largely on a mystical poem, the *Colon* of Xnath Lora, in which the author avers that he has been swallowed by the Serpent and seen through the divine intestine into the future.

Among the intelligentsia of this culture a game is known in which two players attempt to construct symbolic heptagrams by placing variously inscribed tiles on an eleven-lined board, the top lines of the two heptagrams thus overlapping. As each tile is placed on the board its player ascribes to it a metaphysical value appropriate to its inscription. A tile may be taken off the board by its player's opponent, but only if its value is mutually agreed to be less than that of the tile with which the taker must replace it, hence the name of the game which is Thetnol, or Honest Men.

An instance of this game is postulated in which, by skilful play, the two heptagrams have been so interwoven that only the space of one tile remains to be contended. The first player, Mohr Yllamn, completes his heptagram by playing *S*, apparently the strongest piece, with the value 'The Serpent and the River'. His opponent, Toor Hcern, refusing to acknowledge defeat, still appears unable to win. He must play *R* to complete his heptagram, but has only *O* which he plays with the value 'The Jaws of the Jaguar', covering the previously omnipotent *S*. When challenged he argues that the power of Mohr Yllamn's *S* depends wholly on a literal acceptance of

'Within the Serpent, Beyond the Gate of Fangs,
The Way Before Me endless as the Road to the Horizon.'

the opening lines of Xnath Lora's *Colon*. An alternative interpretation could run thus:

Xnath Lora at the Gate of Fangs did not find himself facing the jaws of the Serpent but saw in fact those of the Jaguar reflected in the translucent petals of the Flower. The 1037 scales that Xnath Lora counted between the Serpent's eyes were actually those facets of the focal petal visible from where Xnath Lora stood at the time. In support of this, Halt Rume's argument that the 1037 scales were those which Xnath Lora was allowed to see, not those which *were*, could be extended to assert the necessity for a reflected image, an immediate and complete perception being inconsistent with the primary principles of divinity, eternity and accident. Xnath's subsequent elision of the two experiences (the Flower and the Jaguar) into one (the Serpent), may be ascribed to temporal parallax if Xnath's simple annalism is translated into Perspective Time by applying the 5th Extraordinary Proposition in Piat Thlugh's *Light and Time, Parallels of Pragmatic Function.*

Mohr Yllamn accepts Toor's argument but reminds him

of that rule which insists that any tile placed on the board must be consistent with the definition of the intended heptagram. *O*, having been accepted as stronger than *S*, must now be shown to be *R*. Though they are friends, Mohr Yllamn permits himself a short laugh at Toor's expense. Is this laugh justified?

'No,' I cried, rather too loudly, having become excited by the abbot's game, 'If I understand the thing correctly, we may assume for this society at least a simple prosody. If to this we apply the notions of perspective contained in Piat's Extraordinary Proposition, Toor Hcern could argue the following formula:

Is jaguar
is aguar
is guar
is uar
is ar
is *R*.'

The abbot seemed greatly pleased with this. His own solutions had been to argue that *R* as the Pregnant Woman, a common value for *R*, was thus an infinite series and therefore The Way Before Me which, it follows from Toor's first argument, is included in the Jaguar and a logical extension of its jaws, or that *O*, as the Philosopher's Stone, might be jaws or *R* or what it chose. But my solution, he felt, was more in accordance with Toor's dialectic of disparates and displayed a superior understanding. I was duly flattered, of course, but equally dismayed when the abbot went on to say that in the presence of so superior a philosopher (myself!) he felt he must abdicate his abbatial chair to me. I was too soured with wine to suspect a pleasantry and explained stupidly that I was even now on my way to the capital to plead for the extirpation of philosophy; that this was my duty, the proper response to the dissolution of my daughter.

At breakfast the next day the abbot again placed me beside him and suggested, with reference to the purpose of my journey, that we might usefully consider the hypothetical but still illuminating case of Piat Thlugh, the fictive physicist whose theories we had touched on previously.

'Piat, having achieved fame early, settles into middle age

as a landowner in a small way, with a wife and as many children as is seemly, ambitious now only for a quiet life and quieter death. One evening, however, having retired to share a bottle and a pipe in convivial silence with Halt Rume, a close friend, his peace is abruptly ended: the door of the library bursts open and a dozen troopers rush into the room, seizing and binding its two incumbents. Piat's wife, it transpires, has reported having seen through the library window the reflection in the mirror of her husband being stabbed to death by Halt Rume, using the sabre that had always and still hung beside the mirror. Her affidavit to this effect is produced.

'Piat naturally assumes that his presence alive and hale, confirmed by his wife's subsequent identification, will suffice to correct the misunderstanding. Herein he errs. Sufficient time has elapsed for the traces of any crime to be disguised, and the officer cannot dismiss the matter so lightly.'

By this time I was having difficulty in refraining from fidgeting. The abbot had not touched his breakfast and it was not for me to be his example, but the kidneys before me were becoming spangled with congealing fat and would soon be uneatable. And this after a bad night and a stiff walk on a crisp morning. The abbot:

'A committee of philosophers is assumed, which first asks: Had any action been performed which might be construed as a mime of the supposed event? No, the two of them had remained seated since entering the room. At this discovery gloom settles over the philosophers, until one of them thoughtfully suggests that they need not be bound by Madame Piat's identification of her husband – that Piat minutely resembles himself does not prove that he is himself, two identical objects are not the same object. If the assumption of Piat's identity were suspended, the rest of the evidence might be more successfully considered. With such renewed optimism as this bridging of the hiatus allows, one of the other philosophers demands an inspection of the supposed murder weapon and, the sabre being drawn, its scabbard is found to be full of blood. A further philosopher then demands, since the murder had been reported as seen in or through the mirror, that the mirror be removed from the wall, whereon a large fresh bloodstain is revealed on the crumbling plaster behind. Obviously, by some alchemy (and it is generally felt that Piat's own theories of light and time

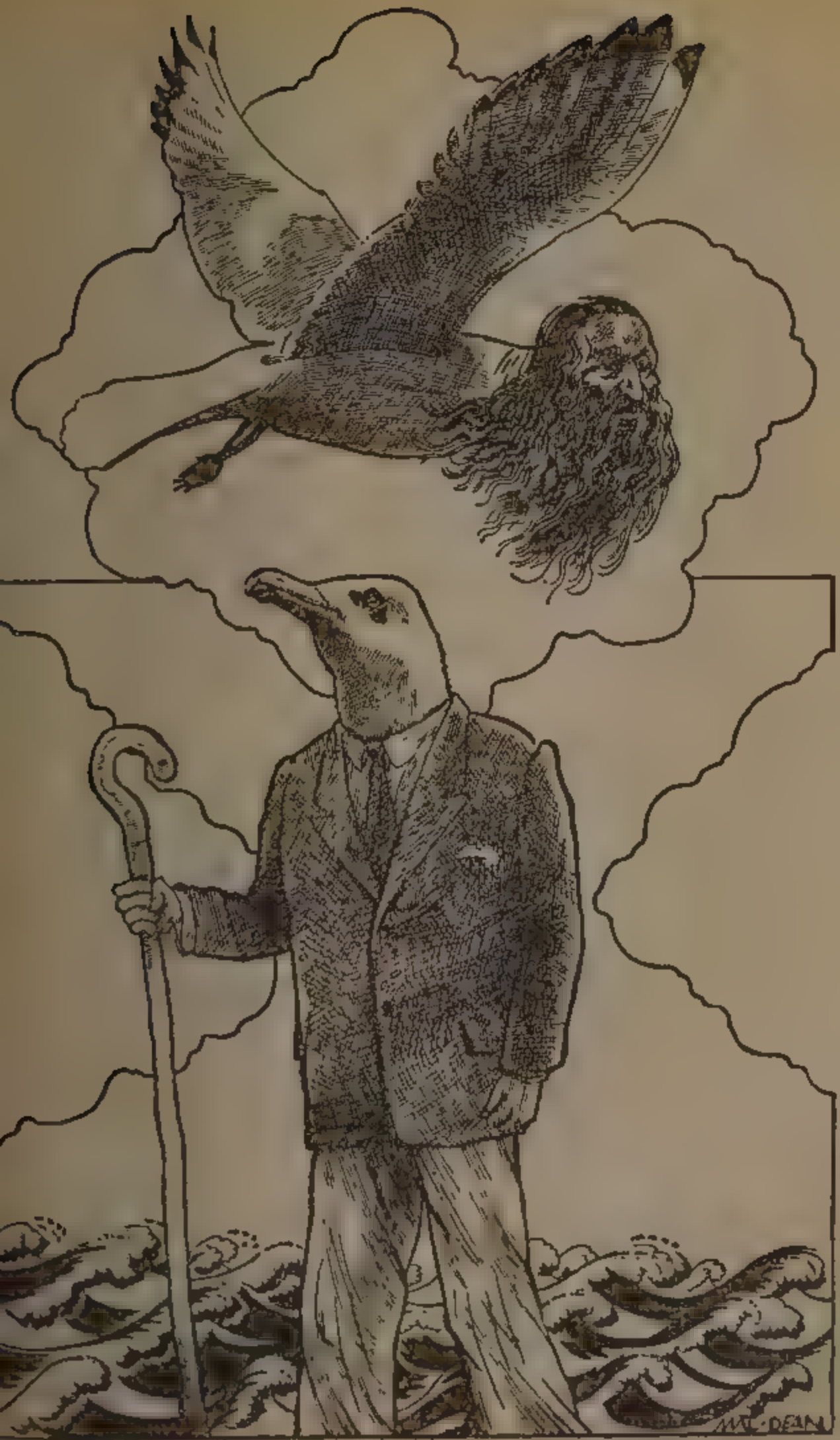
could assist here if properly applied), the murder was committed *within* the mirror.'

I was strongly moved to protest: the state of my breakfast had long banished appetite, but even allowing for my state of mind the abbot's fable was getting too wild. My face must have shown at least a part of my feelings, for the abbot suddenly and apologetically broke of his monologue and bade me eat. I replied, gratefully, that I would eat when he had finished talking, that etiquette could bow to neither whim nor compass. A subsequent brief dialogue produced the removal of the distressing kidneys and the promise of something fresh shortly. 'Conceive,' the abbot measured himself a little rhetoric, 'conceive the emotions of poor Piat, torn so abruptly from bland success and dashed into the abyss of sudden philosophy! His reaction is vigorous and original: he suggests to the committee that the denial of his identity must imply doubt as to that of the persons and authority of all present. It would be more constructive to consider the factor Time. Was it not possible that in some way he had been murdered but was subsequently alive, in which case Halt Rume perhaps had been guilty but could be so no longer? The philosophers cannot accept the conclusion of this argument, so Piat turns to the implications of the mirror. If any intra-specular crime has taken place, a murder within the mirror, then surely an intra-specular solution is required. Could a murder have taken place within the mirror and not without? Could some or all of the events within the library be ab-specular projections, images of a reality within the mirror? Could the room be shown to contain simultaneously both ab-specular and extra-specular phenomena?'

Despite the abbot's excitement, I was hard put to contain my impatience.

'Surely,' I demanded, 'the solution proper to the terms of the problem is that Halt Rume, if his image is found guilty, should be punished only within the mirror; that he be hanged in such a way that a rope suspended over the mirror should be stretched appropriate to his weight and the excreta which accompany hanging be found behind the mirror, the man himself remaining unharmed.'

The abbot frowned, perhaps offended by the brutality of my tone, then his fingers flew up suddenly as if to press back the expressive furrows above his eyes.


MAC·DEAN

'I had in mind something subtler,' he frowned again at the implication of this, and shrugged as though declaring a truce to social niceties, 'something of wider application; to have Piat develop his argument so multiplying and intricating the parameters of the problem that he constructs an ineluctable kaleidoscope of possibility. It is arguable, for instance, that a murder within the mirror is properly the province of authorities within the mirror; or that image of the murder was premonitary, not actual, and that perhaps time was in reverse, that this was a symptom of incipient entropy. Or what follows from the discovery that the shape of the bloodstain behind the mirror was that of a horizontal, not a vertical stain? By rendering each discrete fact into a divergent series of possibilities, I had hoped to have Piat confound the speculative philosophers into a recognition of reality.'

I appreciated the principle but doubted its efficacy, after all the sophistication of fire-power correlates very closely to the increase in population. I said so, but before the abbot could reply I was served with kidneys and baked eggs in a basket of mushrooms and the abbot insisted I eat. While I ate the abbot remained shrunk in meditation, but as my plate was removed he sighed. He could not, he said, absolve himself from adding to my already opulent distrust of philosophers. The improbability of his initial problem, he saw, debased the value of his intended solution. He had hoped to offer some constructive, non-violent form to my campaign against philosophers, but alas . . . He was evidently one of those who imagine soldiers settle all their differences with shrapnel and bayonet, and was working himself up into a state of self-mortification that I was now too well fed to permit.

'We are all liable to err,' I soothed, 'the general stupidity of the species does not allow the exception of ourselves.'

The abbot looked at me curiously, but only nodded by way of comment.

I spent the rest of the day in my quarters with a gallon of beer and a sketching block, devising possible new bridges for the lower pass. I had made some preliminary drawings of the scene on my early morning walk, so the rain, which blew up in mid-morning and was well established by noon, did not deprive me wholly of useful amusement, and I was

glad to be able to present these plans and sketches to the abbot at dinner as a token of gratitude for the hospitality he had so readily provided.

It was during the late afternoon, when I had paused to stretch my legs and sit mellowed over a cigar, that I remembered my earlier assurance to the abbot that we are all more or less fools. The devil of the thing, which these admissions good food or fine weather cheat from us, is that they return to haunt one so. My own plans suddenly appeared asinine. What had seemed so vital in the immediate and bitter aftermath of the seige now manifested itself to my revived reflection as silly and demeaning. One has to lose sometimes to accident and war, and even in sorrow one can behave with dignity. Who was I to scald all philosophers for the faults of the fools among them? I, it struck me, could in no way countenance the abolition of the army, despite the flagrant inanity of many senior officers. Obviously the sooner I returned to the rigours of regimental life the better.

I mentioned this change in my plans to the abbot that evening and he seemed greatly relieved. He would, I suspect, have liked to dissuade me from returning to my military career, but was too shrewd to press the point and turned the conversation to a discussion of modern theories of education. It was my contention, derived partly from gentle malice, that the only disciplines necessary to any man were mathematics, for understanding trajectory and logistics, and music, to imbue a sense of tactical harmony in movement; for the rest, there is no discipline guaranteed to improve one's native wit and a boy can glean all the culture he needs from browsing in his father's library on wet days. The abbot vigorously defended the proper study of history as essential to any responsible social activity, and this I was forced to concede, though I like to think I held my own against metaphysics and philology.

Over the last dozen of wine the abbot asked us all to consider the proposition: If the relationship XY must be temporally represented by that number of typefaces whose permutations are infinite, how should we restructure simple logic to accommodate this? But I was too fuddled from my day's labours at pen and bottle to cope with steep matter of this sort and mumbled myself off to bed.

The following day, the river having fallen, we went down to review the bridge. It was a remarkable contrivance; low in profile and set on buttresses so massive as almost to dam the ravine through which the river roared, it seemed built not to override any inflation of the torrent but bluntly to withstand whatever weight of water might try to overwhelm it, as if the engineer knew or approved only one design of bridge and would alter only the length of the arches, and that minimally, to accommodate variations in the terrain.

I was pleased as well as amused to see it, however, and immediately made arrangements to depart, if possible, before noon. The abbot was concerned that I should stay at least to lunch, but I put him off, pleading soldier's haste and the need to be out of the mountains before dark. Convivial and instructive as his hospitality had been, I dislike enforced idleness and his conversation, of which he offered more as bait to keep me, seemed liable to prove oppressive if indulged too long.

LOVE AT LOST SIGHT

ROBERT MEADLEY

Haller had had a bad day and it was getting worse. He elt soiled. Ash from his cigarette kept flaking in showers cross his suit as the train jolted, to gleam there whitely s if calling attention to the suit's innocuous dilapidation. A blonde girl, strikingly tanned, walked past him looking or a seat, then stood with an anonymous friend by the ar door, attracting general attention. Nervous sideslung lances among open leers cross-hatched the carriage, gliding agerly up tan thighs to orange hem, from gold throat to old breasts, from the window to the littered floor, from pposite sporting pages to tan calves.

Haller kept sneaking glances at her, feeling dreadfully onspicuous. Greasy strands of hair had worked their way nside his collar and were sticking uncomfortably to the back f his neck. Harsh breath scorched by too many cigarettes urned up at the backs of his teeth from his charred throat. His eyes slid up the creaseless stockinged legs until they arred against the orange dress, then jumped abruptly to the ow neckline. The girl remained listening to her friend. Neat ands holding her bag across her thighs, moist smile and ow-lidded eyes fixed on her friend's face, her soft gold and range body curved plumply into the cupped air, apparently blivious of the elaborate lusts and wished adulteries that meared the atmosphere.

Long saffron nicotine stains blazoned along Haller's nail-itten fingers, as though every detail of his personality con-pired to draw attention to him. He stared out of the window, oping to dwell on her image, but his memory blanked every ime and he had to look back. Twice he fiddled with his

tie, once tightened the knot so much he almost choked. He was relieved when she got off.

As if reflected in the window he tried to reassemble her portrait. Fragments of the image gathered, then mutated in unfixed, unwished-for patterns: the lynx eyes, lazily and practisedly half closed, now swelled hideously from the golden face; the line of blonde hair tucked tidily behind one ear harshened and lengthened to an infinite edge; the mouth, the mouth slid slowly and deliberately into distorted perspective, the lips projected forward growing and distending with pointless, cruel plasticity, fixed lips around white bright teeth that clacked idiotic nonsenses, opening and closing with rigid, mechanical vowellessness, sounding only a slow rattle of consonontal clicks as nerveless gums jarred to the irregular rhythms of obscene mouthings.

The train stopped, and for a bizarre moment Haller thought he'd had a heart attack. Clawing back to reality, his eyes fastened on the station's name plate. He'd missed his stop. Galvanised by the guard's whistle, he grabbed up his coat and jumped to the platform as the train started again.

He had to wait twenty minutes for a train back. It was dark now and cold. He stamped up and down, cursing the empty platform. When his train came, he chose a door with no faces near it and huddled sulkily on his own. Eventually he noticed that all the other occupants of the carriage were male: an average cross-section of tired shirts, varying degrees of baldness, brief cases, overalls, scuffed oxfords. In no way remarkable, except that it was late and they were going towards town. His end of the carriage was empty, the other full. Though he had chosen this, it now seemed somehow sinister.

At the next station a tall Negro, outrageous in opera hat and full evening dress, and carrying an immense suitcase, got on. He grinned at Haller, bobbing his head from side to side as if his neck was double-hinged.

'Ah,' the Negro exaggerated his accent in self parody, 'am John de Conkeroo.'

He seemed to concentrate on Haller, bobbing and grinning and moving as though all his joints were universally mounted. Haller nodded back a couple of times, then lit a cigarette and smoked furiously, half hoping to bury himself in flaked white ash.

The suitcase lid flew open. John the Conkeroo wove

ound it in a swirl of opera cape, drawing out large lifesize olls with gold skins and orange print dresses, the very nage of the girl Haller had admired earlier. As each one as set on its feet it walked away purring and sat on the nee of one of the carriage's occupants. When only Haller as without one the Negro shrugged and said, 'Oooh-ooh, oodoo, man,' then turned away, rippling lean folds in the ack of his neck. Haller stared.

None of the recipients of these synthetic favours seemed t all surprised. They waited dutifully until all were pro-ided for, then moved their right hands in unison along dentical tan thighs and under uniform orange hems, their eft hands simultaneously opening ten-inch zips. The train topped. Haller flung himself out wildly.

Haller couldn't face work next day. After two hours under he bedclothes he couldn't face his room either. He went nto town. On the train he hid behind a thriller but nothing appened. Beyond the window surprised bright sunlight urst in dazzling slats through the dust and smog.

Coming out of the station he turned left towards the park. There seemed to be a lot of couples about, men of all sorts nd ages with coined young women of gold and orange. Women of other descriptions passed him but he didn't otice. He walked alone among the hand-linked half-plastic ouples, determinedly not looking at them, gazing in shop vindows and meeting their reflection. Passing an empty estaurant he dived in for refuge and found a table in a far orner.

There was one other customer; a very wide man with long ark hair and bladed cheekbones obtruding above a full eard. Innocent pale eyes peered at Haller from under rooping eyebrows. A nap-worn bowler hat lay on a folded ewspaper by the stranger's elbow. Haller drank coffee and ried to avoid the stranger's gaze. Once he got the impression hat the stranger's features had begun to change, the beard ading slightly and the hair receding. Horrified he looked way. When he looked back the face had corrected itself. Haller paid the sneering waiter and left.

Outside a club he paused to look at the photographs of he strippers. The women were reassuringly real despite the photographer's crude touchings up. The tout, a military ooking man more appropriate to the corps of commis-

J·CAWTHORN·74

sionaires, condescended to ignore Haller. Haller walked on and bought a peach from a street vendor.

His teeth were just splitting flesh from stone when he noticed another nightmare couple outside a row of shops. A nervous young man was leaving his orange gold girl to stare in a boutique window while he entered a chemist's, too embarrassed to take her in with him. Haller waited until the youth had gone, then walked down the street to the motionlessly waiting girl.

'Excuse me,' he said.

Impassive eyes watched his reflection. He spoke again but there was still no response. He snapped his fingers in front of her eyes the way they do in the movies but nothing stirred behind her empty stare. He touched her arm. Large multiplying blisters grew where his hand had touched her; coruscating bubbles that spread rapidly across her arm, breasts, throat and face before the skin overstretched and burst. She crumpled mutilated to the unswept street. Dazed and revolted, Haller gazed between his acid hand and the blister-embossed deflation at his feet. Orange and gold flames drew oily smoke from the withered plastic.

Starting from his shock Haller ran, his hand outflung at arm's distance. In the next street someone caught hold of him, swinging him round with his own impetus. Haller struggled to get away and lost. He looked up at his captor. It was the cheekboned, umber-eyebrowed man in the shabby bowler who had watched him drinking coffee in the restaurant.

'I am the Pawnbroker,' the stranger articulated precisely as if uneasy with the language, 'I exchange things.'

Horror flourished in Haller's skull. The Pawnbroker began to change: his heavy umber eyebrows faded to almost invisible fine silver, the long jaw shortened while the beard fattened into wealthy dewlaps that spread around the receding jaw in a multiplicity of chins. Lifting the bowler, he wiped his now bald scalp with a maroon silk handkerchief from his new coat's breast pocket, then took Haller by the arm and walked him along towards the new shopping complex. He sighed.

'I gave you a rough deal, Harry, on the train last night and this morning here in town.'

'You?' Haller struggled for words bitter enough to demolish the nightmare figure gripping his right arm.

'I had to make you feel, Harry, to make you understand

what it's all about. If I'd approached you from the blue and explained what I could offer, would you have done other than dismiss me as a petty madman, a harmless crank? I had to soften you up, to prepare you for my pitch, to open your eyes to your true needs. I can provide for you, Harry.'

The Pawnbroker pronounced each phrase separately and emphatically, as though revealing an interminable hand of cards one by one. At the last pause, prepared to agree to anything, Haller asked, 'What do I have to do?'

'Do, Harry? You don't do anything except squander the money I'll give you in return for the loan of your appearance. Money is all you need in this life, Harry, the rest is metaphysical.'

The Pawnbroker had already produced a huge snakeskin wallet and was flicking through great wads of money. Dollars, deutschmarks, lira, yen, at pounds he stopped and took out a packet of new twenty pound notes.

'One thousand round pounds.'

He put the money in Haller's hand and added a plainly wrapped package from his coat pocket.

'And a bar of my miracle soap. Mojo soap to wash away the dreary past.'

Haller stared at the things in his hands.

'What do I do now?'

'Just spend, dear boy, wash and then spend.'

The Pawnbroker released Haller's arm and swung off, twirling his umbrella. At the far end of the street he paused to touch his hat to a gold and orange girl, then disappeared. Haller woke as from a trance and stuffed the money and soap into his pockets, then he walked hurriedly away between the gleaming new shops.

He was too impatient to go home. Instead he booked himself into the best hotel, gleefully rippling his fistful of money at the amazed clerk, and immediately started running a deep hot bath. While he was waiting for the bath to fill he ordered up brandy and cigars. He spread the money out on the bed and lay down beside it, listening to the murmur of the bath water. A waiter, gawping at the money on the bed, served him eagerly with his order. Haller let him look but decided against a tip, he must bathe before spending, so he smiled amiably inferring there was hope yet.

In his bath he dreamed of being seduced by orange and gold girls on an infinite bed of money. Golden girls drew orange dresses over their gold heads, revealing white gold

nipples and pubic hair against red gold bodies, white gold lips and eyes in red gold faces around which white gold hair fell to red gold shoulders.

He stirred and flannelled himself thoroughly with the mojo soap, then lit a cigar and blew smoke rings at the smiling gold face of the Pawnbroker. Flecks of ash dissolved blackly in the tinted water.

Eventually and reluctantly he got out of the cooling bath and stood in front of the full length mirror on the wall. There was no apparent change. He rubbed himself briskly with a large towel. Piece by piece, neat and dry and clean like fish for kedgeree, his white flesh flaked away uncovering the dissolution of the bloodless viscera beneath. Two slow globules of condensation rolled from empty eye sockets down either side of his skulled nose. The room, the hotel, the world all mutated through a kaleidoscope of orange and gold features, the Pawnbroker's last logical metamorphosis. The bones of Haller's skeleton bounced and scattered as they fell.

THE BROKEN FIELD

NIGEL FRANCIS

Cut.
Cut.
Cut.

Now who wants legs like this or an arm like this? He undid the clips at the ends of his trousers and rolled back the shortened sleeve of his chain-and-jewel-covered jacket. The leg stumps were crimson and had formed wrinkled pads over the healed bone. His arm had been cut off below the elbow, and an inch of bone jutted beyond the joint. It had been smoothed into a sharp dome and was covered in purplish, flakey skin. He said fiercely I can hold a needle in the crack while I thread it with my other hand – watch – there – quick as a silch.

Blank.
Blank.
Blank.

When I woke up in hospital I was strapped up so tight I couldn't move anything so I didn't know the damage. When they told me I seemed to sink down into a dark well. Tears came out for days and I can't really remember much.

Later Gallend came to see me but she didn't want me with the real spark any more. She kept going out of focus. Jealousy and anger nearly burst my chest open. I tried to stab her. Then the white coats ran about and things are a bit blurred again. Got a fag on you? He took one and the red glow of the pull lit up the sores that covered his face.

Sink.
Sink.
Sink.

When I got out I hated the false legs and soon threw away the claw they'd given me. I'd got a lot of money in compensation; I was rich – bloody rich with nowhere to go.

I hobbled about, hating everybody. I got drunk. Pissed out of my mind. Every day a long coiling dream that merged into the next day and the next. One day I woke up in a cemetery soaked by the rain and I knew I was doing it for effect, because I needed sympathy and there'd be some quiet woman who'd see me and we'd lose our misery in a sort of blind passion where my useless body wouldn't matter. He peeled a layer of skin from the arm stump and held the square inch of membrane up to a faint light from the instrument panel. Good one. Got a collection, see, in here.

Fire.

Fire.

Fire.

Gallend hated motorcycles but for years I'd kept fixing up old ones in a rented garage. If things became difficult with her I'd retreat to steel and alloy, things which fitted to the thou' and ran in green oil. When my instincts failed over her my affection for her poured into engine cases and pistons and rocker boxes, things that were hard and yet still delicate and fine and so beautiful they made my heart run up. I've only realised what was going on then after a long time and it's even longer before the ideas go into words.

I opened the garage and drained out the petrol and oil from the three bikes in there. Then I smashed them up with a hand axe. I was a maniac. A crowd gathered and one man kept asking me to stop. But I hacked away, glass shattering, plates and chain cases smashed in, oil and wire and battery acid everywhere, seats ripped apart. I paid someone to clear it all up, and came back later to an empty place.

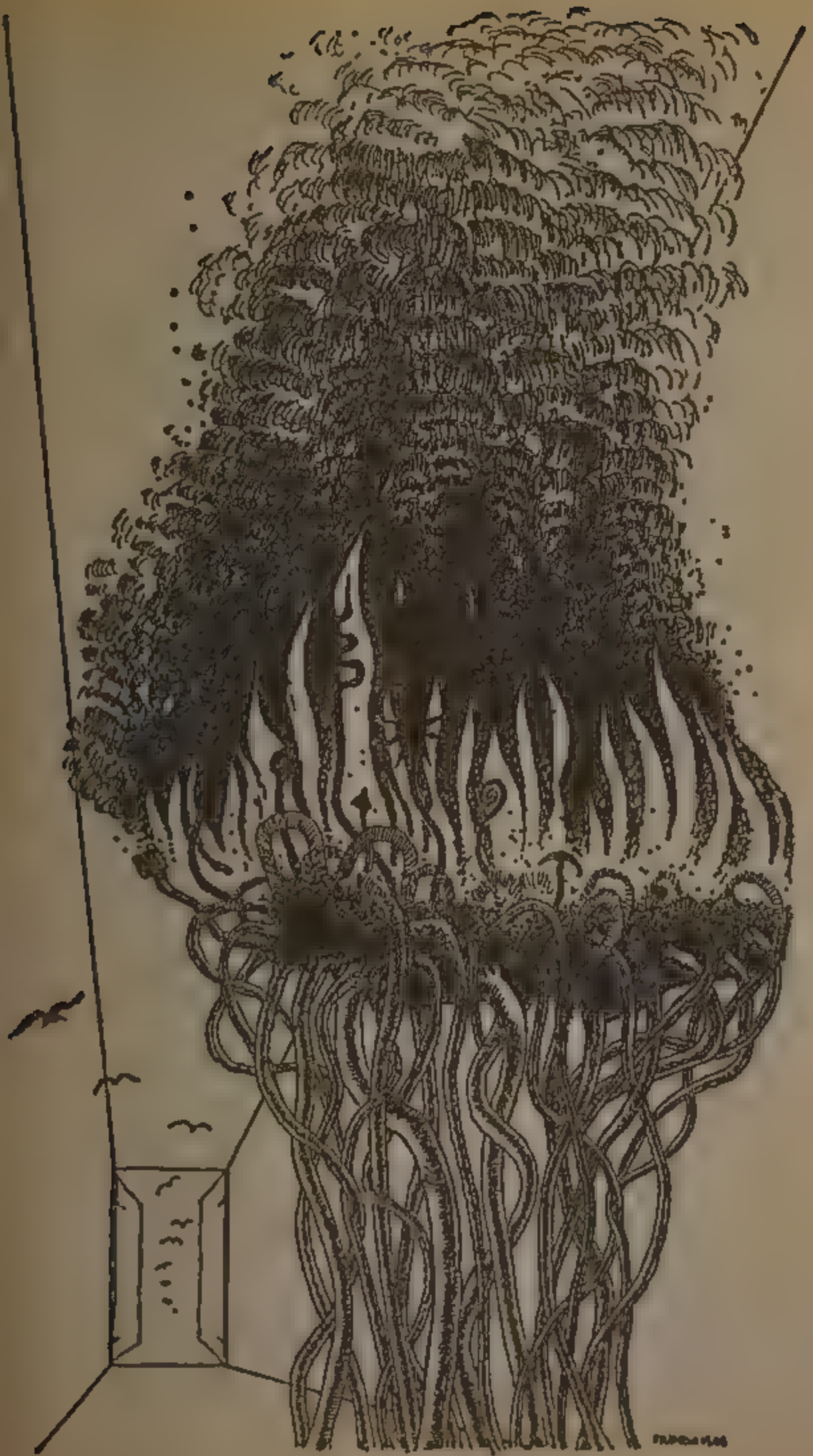
A dribble of pus moved down his cheek from one of the red boils below his eye.

Pulse.

Pulse.

Pulse.

I was weak from the drink but I spent the next few days designing a car for myself, and getting stronger. The prototype of this. He patted the roof bubble of the small vehicle in which he sat. I'd eat some food, draw a bit, puke, eat, draw, puke – and so on, until I wasn't puking so much and I'd got a mass of drawings. Then I had it made specially. Didn't have to worry about money – had plenty. And it



went like hell. In the speed I forgot about my legs and normal people whose walking feet I'd hated, brain flashing with crunched toes and razored calves and bonesaws. And see this hand? It grew. It's about twice as big as it used to be . . .

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

But there was something wrong still. I had to get out of the runner and walk into shops, etc. I was so slow I used to stop in the street and shout in frustration and anger, clawing at the legs, hitting them because they were against me. So I had this made smaller, with these tracks more mobile. I go up to shops and people come out and put stuff in for me. Tape recorder down there: video, oven, paper, paint, cameras, book-microfilm unit, waste hatch. I was getting there.

Accelerate.

Accelerate.

Accelerate.

I almost didn't need the legs, and kept them off most of the time. I still felt empty, only alive when I had a near-miss on a corner or something. I drive fast. But my hatred of people lessened as I became more cut off inside here.

Eventually I realised I didn't need to go out at all. I put in a sewage and washing system, and air circulators. I haven't been outside for months. Don't even carry legs any longer.

Oh well, better get some cigarettes. He pulled down the hatch and hummed away, weaving among the lines of vehicles that glimmered over the interchanges and flyovers.

Seep.

Seep.

Seep.

I meant to tell you last time – I've got these sticky places – it's getting more difficult to get myself off the seat now and the stump of this leg is permanently down, even if I pull. Just see what's sticking behind me, will you? He leaned forward. A patch of short, sea-anemone-like feelers on his back were wrenched free from their embrace of a similar set on the seat.

Tentacles, eh . . . well, it doesn't hurt but maybe I should try to get it off. Use this spoon. Then we'll do the leg.

Grip.

Grip.

Grip.

Lucky I've got cooling in here – looks hell outside. By the way, how long ago did we do the scraping? A week? Well, they're back – worse – look at these. Pink veinous ropes had grown between his stomach and the sides of the runner, their ends like spreading tree-roots. They start off like threads, but thicken up so quick I can't pull them out. Tried to talk to the doctor but all you get is a computer card to fill in. Makes me sound mad – anyway, they've never seen anything like this. What's more, I've felt better lately. Haven't been going so fast, either. I don't care, really, but I suppose I'd better try to get rid of it again.

The fleshy tubes were cut out and the anemones ripped from the skin. The wounds were cauterised with a soldering iron, and powdered; where the tubes had joined the runner there were small holes, from which dribbled clear, viscous liquid.

Later his tyres screamed under savage acceleration.

Fast.

Fast.

Fast.

They reappeared within three days. I don't mind them any more. He stroked a pink tube, now thicker than his wrist. He seemed unaffected by the panting heat which dulled faces all around. Odd, I suppose, but I'm more peaceful now, not empty so much. The constant flutter of cigarettes had gone and the sores were less angry, healing.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Tubes multiplied and a complex web surrounded him, connecting his flesh to the runner. He spoke slowly, the words sometimes bubbling through saliva. Parts of the machine . . . have . . . gone soft . . . that aluminium facia . . . it's spongy . . . other places too . . . I'm warm . . . part of it all . . . my legs . . . miles long . . . melting . . . through the houses . . . His head came up slowly, smiling. Listen . . . its the sea . . . toot toot . . . Gallend . . . go . . . into the wave . . . now . . . Now.

The canopy closed, and the huge hand, festooned with thin cords, reached for the controls and the runner bled away into the night.

Blackout.

Blackout.

Blackout.

The webs of tubes grew denser; lethargic crowds stared. It whispered slowly down the ringways all day, stopping briefly before the last strong light faded. Between the criss-crossing tubes the face showed, skin clear as milk, sapphire-blue eyes luminous in their dark sockets.

Then the turbines murmured and the runner glided back to the garage.

Light.

Light.

Light.

The city shimmered in the heat. Dust blurred the bricks and paint cracked. The concrete of tall housing units crumbled, energy absorbed by the exhausted landscape.

Later a tall man walked the desert streets. In the garage he had just left a streamlined form sagged into shapelessness, and water which had gushed out of it and down the ramp on to the hot tarmac, was stained with streams of sluggish crimson. Soon flies moved towards gelatinous lumps and scraps of thin membrane.

The slight wetness of the man's skin quickly disappeared and the large black eyes scanned the remaining buildings, his thick, white hair forming a brilliant halo in the searing light.

Heads of listless women moved round, following his long strides, their faces filled with enormous, agonised adoration.

BLACK HOLE

NIGEL FRANCIS

'Look out Farmer look out the wind.'

Wind smashes through the woods clawing Lipsey's skin into waveforms. Farmer is dragged along holding Lipsey's heel. Storms of twigs rip their clothes and Farmer grasps a sapling root, letting go only when the pain from the pebbles bombarding his hand becomes unbearable. Their heads are pushed hard against the spongy soil, features squeezed tight with fear, and Farmer's sobs are torn soundlessly away in the shrieking air.

Then the wind stops.

Lipsey's head comes up and he looks around. Leaves and twigs patter down. Momentarily someone appears beside a far off rhododendron clump, and then is gone.

BLOODSEED: SPACE DISTURBANCE 1995

Better get back before the Commander wants us. Can't find anything anyway. I'm getting worse I think after that letter. John glows translucent red, heating to orange around the membranes that connect his arms and legs, covering Leonniel like a folded bat.

Yearning ache for the old days. Messages received in wormcasts and rust, instructions in frost, maps behind bark for me from the great organism which I never thought about but which ran everything. How did I think then? All so long ago and so changed.

Sitting in the quiet barn knowing something is wrong. Sunlight from cracks and holes in the old boards lancing down in thin, bright columns. There were no maps.

Leave the barn and cross the uneven yard to piles of stone slabs beside the old hen houses. Lift them all but there is nothing. Fingers shake increasingly.

Under the damp beams there is nothing and the search becomes urgent; nothing in the toolshed, under the old cauldrons, by disintegrating boilers or in the orchard. Along unsearched thickets and through overgrown ditches. Heart thumps and emptiness grows in the chest. Nothing under the tiles and gutters. No maps. OOOOOOOOOHHHHHHH

'It's obvious that we've got to keep all the machines able to run and all the equipment usable until such time as they're required.' The Commander coughed and scratched the dense mat of hairs under his chin. 'Central are trying to find out how the check the – er – shall we say "supergrowth" of plant life we've had to deal with more and more. . . . Meanwhile again as I've said much work is needed and details will be posted. That's all . . . Oh and I want to see Farmer and Lipsey in the office.'

He watched the mass of people leave the hall, and, scratching again, went up the wide stairway to his office overlooking the operations room. Lipsey and Farmer came in.

'You've reported another sudden storm wind, I hear.'

'Yes sir, this afternoon. No one believed us sir.'

'You there too Farmer?'

'Yes sir, and my coat's all ripped. Trees brought down as well, if you want to look – in the west woods sir.'

'Mmm. Odd that it didn't affect us here.'

Both men mumbled.

'OK OK. Anyone else around?'

'I thought I saw Bloodseed.'

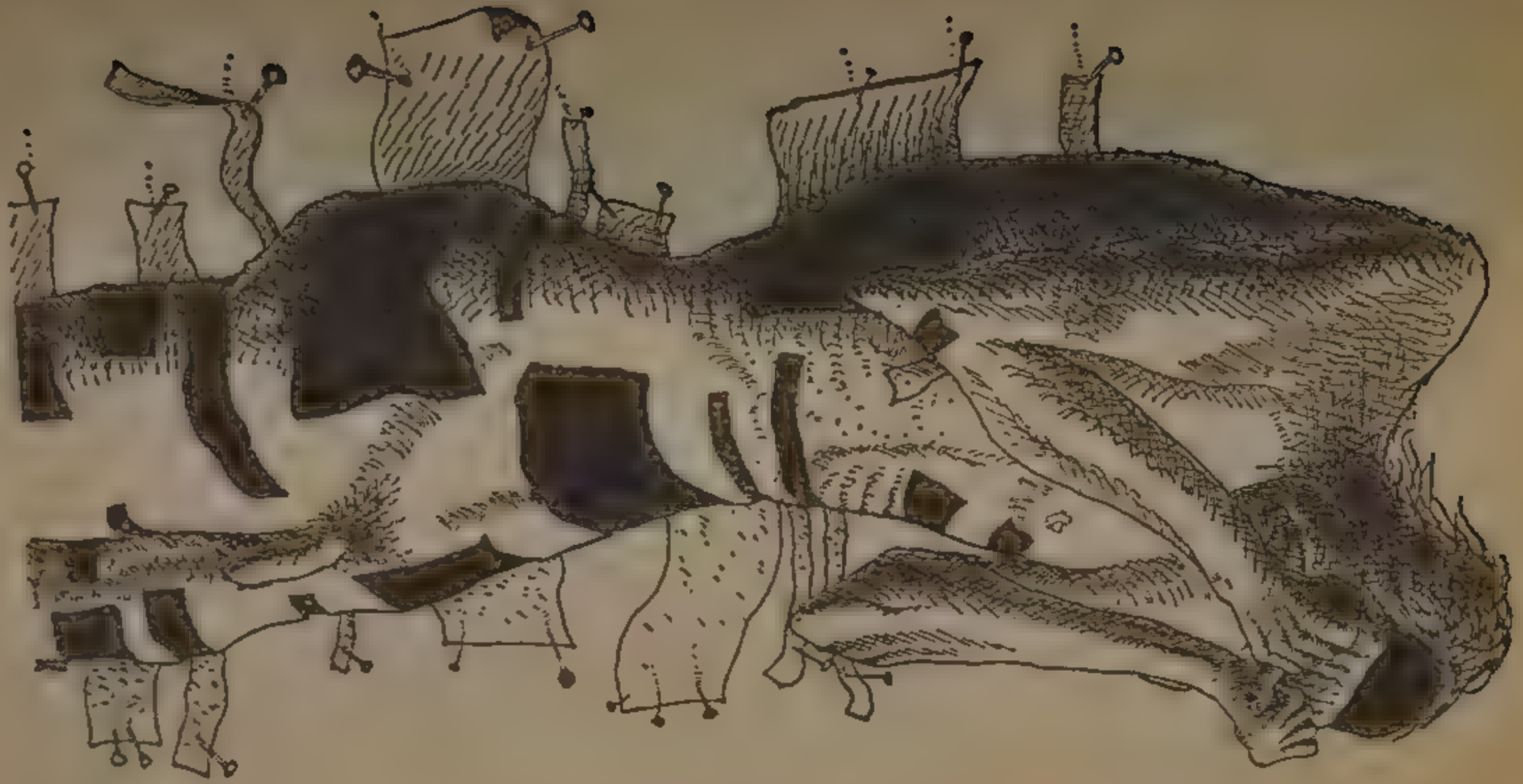
A doodle grew under the Commander's pen and after a few seconds' silence he coughed and waved them out, telling them to call the surgeon.

'How's the sicklist, Rawlston? By the way, see Farmer and Lipsey this afternoon?'

'Well no one's died and a few of the new disease patients seem to be improving. . . . I did in fact see those two and their cuts were similar to wind-damage cases I've seen this last few weeks. Interesting circumstances though. . . .'

The Commander's hand made as if to scratch in his beard but it stopped. He watched the tall pines through the diamond panes of his window and said, 'How's Bloodseed.'

'Well, I moved him back I'm afraid. No one likes him. They can't get near him, and he mutters and rambles a bit



One of the victims of this change we've had I think. Some how what kept certain forces at bay before the collapse i gone, and things are breaking through. We're getting inter ference from areas that w –'

The Commander cut in roughly: 'All very vague, Doc tor.' There was a silence before he looked up and saic quietly, 'I've told your predecessor but haven't mentioned this to you before. We found a female skeleton when we tool over Bloodseed's place. Had to kick a door down to get in The room stank. His mother I think. Only a few people here know. I don't want this talked about – understand?'

BLOODSEED: SPACE DISTURBANCE 1996

Out into the yard and sun full in the face: eyes burn with green and crimson blobs. Then, in the red penumbra, dark shapes. A wave of shock spreads from the heart outwards Men all around, watching. There is no breath; sink to th floor, leg muscles twitching.

'Ford and Jones round the back. Hurlow into that barn.

The rest close in. Soldiers. Fragments of sound come from a small officer: '. . . afraid . . . won't hurt you . . . alone . . . are your parents . . . anyone else here . . .'

Range around their faces. Cannot speak. The officer's jaw movements mesmerise and the sounds blur. The skin of his cheeks and mouth becomes almost disengaged from the nebulous head.

The officer becomes uncomfortable, stops speaking frowns, and turns to his men. The ring breaks up.

The voices of the soldiers become a chant. Long shadow men ripple across the yard on interlocking routes. Eyes fi on nothing and the whole pattern plays over open retinas.

The officer comes back.

'Well this place is being taken over. You'll have to com with me. Anything you want to get?' He stands for a few seconds waiting for an answer.

Then footsteps recede and tears spangle and fall awa down to the stones below.

On the way up the track to the big road grab for a piec of bark that hangs by a few tendons of sappy wood. But a the arm arcs out a soldier pushes on from behind. The las chance of a map is gone; there will be no more maps OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOHHHHH

UNKNOWN DISORDER REGISTER/DR PARRY/ PATIENT – BLOODSEED, EST. AGE 12

Still wild, still has fits of sobbing occasionally though these occur less frequently now. Been here a year and seems to be settling down. Does not talk much with others – very quiet. Last ten days disturbing development. Giving out unusual strong smell – other children keep away. Smell as far as I can discover has no bacteriological source and frequent bathing does not help. We have kept him in hospital for the last six days. Even nurses steer clear. Something like bad meat, a small shade beyond a healthy smell, but just enough to create something lurking and disgusting.

BLOODSEED: SPACE DISTURBANCE 1997

I am still being shaken by phrases that surface suddenly and overwhelm what is already in my brain. Crinkle crinkle out comes the letter with the small lines concerning Felonniel and John, the secret king. He's got her now, but she will be the last on my list of failures. I shall be here just long enough for the investigation.

From rooftops I watch, seeing her with him, almost hidden in the hypnotic cocoon he has created. Crackling sparks run down his limbs. Brilliantly he juggles multicoloured balls and amazes her with his lithe acrobatics. Sheaves of his dark, powerful drawings fascinate her.

In the distance drums pulse and the turquoise sky darkens around a razor moon. Soon their clothes fall and hands trace the acres of skin. Their bodies twist and rock together, the railtracks humming for miles with the breathing. Then there is a shuddering scream: the juggling-balls scatter, drawings fly. Great gouts of rich semen surge through her, lunging out from the huge penis. OOOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHH

UNKNOWN DISORDER REGISTER/DR RAWLSTON/ PATIENT – BLOODSEED, EST. AGE 18

No recorded outbursts for two years.

Into intensive unit yesterday for unprecedented con-

dition: the boy has grown scales, which have now spread all over his body. Attack began eight days ago.

Initially skin covered with soft points growing out of it. These grew to the size of small fingernails but still remained soft and transparent. On further growth the original skin completely disappeared behind this protective layer, except for the top of his head and genital region. Scales much finer in some areas, notably the face. Three days ago they started hardening and turned pale brown colour.

He still appears unconcerned about his condition, though face occasionally breaks into remarkable momentary grimaces, expressions of great pain. As usual extremely withdrawn: very hard to obtain any information from him.

(In the wards he is something of a joke among the nurses, due also to his habit of sending obscure, passionate notes to one or two of them – Love of unobtainable?)

He is under constant observation; as yet no satisfactory diagnosis. Tests continue.

BLOODSEED: SPACE DISTURBANCE 1998

Almost got him now. Listen in doorways. Up corridors and long, deep wooden stairways. The heat increases as bulky cast-iron radiators glow red hot against polished walls. A smell of bubbling paint grows more powerful; bubbles burst.

He is coming now, almost silent on his smooth bearings. John. John the man of bone and brass and sharp hooks and wires. A siren starts; smoke and vapour pour from cracks all around.

Along more corridors following, under tall windows letting in sweeps of rain, through swing doors, down shutes, watching the light glimmer from his glass tubes and the blued bulbs inside. Furious pumps in his neck spurt pale fluids to his swollen organs; pipes come adrift, the fingers searching over stretched membranes. His bracing-wires snap; solder melts. He slows in a screeching swirl of smoke and oil.

There is suddenly blood everywhere, running in rivulets and spurts among cut skin and gristle. Above it flashes the axe. Felonniel is hacked out, arms and legs drifting away down debris-laden streams. OOOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHH

'It was definitely Bloodseed sir. I believe he was crying . . . well, his face was wet anyway. . . .'

'All the branches and leaves seemed to go in his direction?'

'Yes sir. I saw branches from two sides torn off and spin over towards him. We were almost at the woods bunker when it started and even then my hands and face got some of the force. Jones was just behind me. I think the tree that hit him only missed me by a few inches.'

'How *is* Jones, Doctor?'

'Pretty comfortable considering what happened. His leg's broken and of course there's the shock.'

The Commander coughed and said, 'Well I've been out there and the direction trees have fallen points to the place you saw Bloodseed. There are also converging furrows that I found very odd. General damage seems if anything worse than usual. . . .' The Commander's fingers tapped the convoluted doodles on his jotting pad. 'I hoped this would stop. No one's been able to find out why it happens and Bloodseed's the only unusual factor as far as I can see.'

He walked to the window and looked out onto the six-foot-high lawn grass waving in the wind. Birds wheeled over the bursting new growths of the hedges, whose old discipline had broken. He turned back.

'I'd get nothing from him, I'm sure. Best to keep a watch, plotting all his movements. Rumours travel so fast in a place like this, but I don't want a word of it to get out. Understand? I want at least three people watching him all the time, all from different points. You three going to help?'

Chairs creaked. They all agreed, and bunched round the old mahogany desk examining lists of names for other possible watchers.

In their minds Bloodseed assumed a larger, more shadowy, obsessional quality and a feeling of dislike crept in with their curiosity.

BLOODSEED: SPACE DISTURBANCE 1999

Move the lamps into position now and remove the outer plates, cracking the bolts with large cutters. Metallic dust eddies in the light, and John smells of oil and lavender. Remove more places, then the green glass windows. Spiders and woodlice scatter. John shivers at his nakedness; noise crackles from deep in the neck.

Brush away the broken stumps of bracing wires and unscrew the switchboards, catching the sharp stink of scorched plastic. Blue sparks fizz between the clumps of wires, and short-circuits blow small bulbs in anti-vibration mountings. Worms flop down, their drip-feeds smashed.

The cold increases. Fingers of mist feel through the wires. Glass pipelines are torn from sockets and shattered; cogs are bent, hacked off. Slippery tubes stretch out and snap, dribbling viscous fluids. Dying grubs squirm with decreasing spasms.

The hole becomes deeper, but the bonesaw is needed less and the complex mass gradually thins. Hands are cut on shards of glass, swarf corkscrews from drills and cutters. Strained joints creak. Wire and pipes and dials become finer, having to be cut away with scalpels and scissors.

Then there is almost nothing: wires as thin as threads, quills, fine springs, tiny bulbs bursting.

The lamps search into the mist. Nothing. Slowly the answer comes through.

John never lived; he is a myth created by her to avoid me. The head feels waves of heat rising from the body.

Nothing.

John is just an excuse, a shield to keep away my poison. No one. NO ONE. I am diseased. OOOOOOOOOOOOO-OOHHHHHHHHH

'Well we all saw it. He was definitely at the focus. Somehow Bloodseed seems to be something to do with the actual cause. Can't quite understand how but there it is. Anyone else agree?'

The semicircle around the Commander's desk nodded. He said, 'Anything you can do, Doctor?'

The surgeon shook his head. 'Supplies just aren't arriving any more. I've even run out of common stuff like sleeping pills.'

'Got any ideas just why this happens?'

'Well . . . there's been so much that we've had no reason for. Almost fifty percent of the illnesses I get now I have never seen or heard of before. Plants grow at enormous speed –' he waved his arm towards the window' – and there's no satisfactory explanation for that. Forces which we had perhaps suppressed seem to be coming through gaps, weaknesses, what you will, created by the Collapse

Bloodseed seems to be the most extreme example of this so far. Who knows what's going to turn up next.'

The surgeon's tired eyes looked up at the Commander, who spoke again. 'Meanwhile the place is slowly getting torn to bits. I've got to stop this happening immediately. Centre's very disturbed at the reports.'

He waited for ideas in the tense silence, wondering if Bloodseed was the first stirring of a future so different that his intelligence was just not powerful enough to assemble any of its perspectives. The surgeon had spoken before to him about Bloodseed's internal emptiness somehow being translated into physical manifestations, and the words had at first meant nothing. But after a few days germs of understanding had risen, fed by the unconscious computers of his brain.

Conrad said, 'If we transport him somewhere he's still a liability to the system.' He looked down at the floor. 'I think there's only one way out. . . .'

There was a murmur. After a pause the Commander asked, 'Where is he now?'

'In the bottom woods sir.'

Another pause.

The Commander said, 'Conrad, Booth, get two rifles and twenty rounds from the store. Bring them here.'

He handed each a red card.

When they had gone those remaining stood up muttering in low voices, shuffling their feet; committed.

BLOODSEED: SPACE DISTURBANCE 2000

Back through the fog. Steps uninterested in real movement. Black emptiness in the stomach, tears dripping from the chin.

Into the shattered, tangled remains. Brush the hand over wires a long way off. Cut membranes flap. Large white nodules appear, somehow more familiar than the few minutes' desperate cutting warrants. Bolts and glass and wire everywhere. Where has it been seen before, long ago?

Sudden feelings of recognition: the tubes and bars appear like features in half-forgotten dreams.

Past pillars and girders – surfaces which have been seen before, years before, constantly. A buzzing begins at the

back of the head and creeps up over the scalp. Look in horror at the sticky hands.

Breathing comes faster. For an age the furrows and ridges of the plates have been coded within the skull. Windows, stainless pipes, flanges: all KNOWN.

Heartbeats race.

Out into the woods, patterns everywhere bombarding his eyes with information. The outline of the hills, the falling ground, the jarred trunks, the twisting bark. Maps. A sea of maps all flooding in the same information, over and over.

Far below a long terminal groan breaks from the throat.

'It's me.

IT'S ME.'

OOOO

I SAY BEGONE! APOTROPAIC NARCOSIS, I'M GOING TO READ THE DAMNED THING, HA HA

JOHN CLUTE

REVIEW FOR NEW WORLDS

One hell of a lot deeper than plummet sounds into *The Eighty-Minute Hour*, Brian W. Aldiss's emphysematous new science fiction space opera spoof about the genre's heatdeath and maybe his persona's likewise, the reader with true grit will finally come across a few interesting pages, and may feel, in consequence, an absurd gratitude for their presence in this distressing text from a significant author (1974) and Jonathan Cape (£2.25). I felt absurdly grateful. The passages of interest occur toward the end of a running parody of sword and sorcery opera which Aldiss interweaves – through alternate chapters – with the rest of the book, in a sort of epistemological guying of the convention of the *deadpan multiverse*, a marketing device (Miss Eternal Return? I'd like you to meet Einstein Waffle, no petting now!) which flings together miscellaneous bumpf looted from anthropology and comparative religion in order to resuscitate sequence heroes killed off too soon by authors bored to catatonia by – say – Julliann of the Sharkskin and his horse Morngloom of mimsy pastel, manureless.

The Sword-and-Sorcery-Opera-of-the-Multiverse's pene-

plain exiguity of content; the glum weedy kitsch of its dia-
logue conventions; the deep moroseness underlying those
arbitrary changes of venue (uh, structure is like metaphor)
endemic to a subliterature whose typical reader might well
be described, in marketing terms, as a Noumena Wanker;
these characteristics Aldiss sends up by moderately inten-
sifying them, and because in these pages (alone) he controls
his voice, his multiverse parody comprises the most accessible
and enjoyable line of narrative assault in *The Eighty-
Minute Hour*. By the time our forthcoming quotation from
the book comes around, moreover, Aldiss is about to snap
shut his epistemological gape and to reveal the fact that the
hero of his parody – Julliann of the Sharkskin himself –
inhabits not a multiverse but a drug-induced phantasy, that
his true name is merely Julian, and he is a legless sourpuss
living in a San Diego slum in a world nearing apocalypse,
and that he is related to some of the overriding novel's
ostensible protagonists, the last and least of whom, one
Durrant Surinat, also legless but cheery about it, presumably
narrates the whole caboodle in the first person. Narrative
omniscience is thus eschewed, but mainly in the breach.
Indeed, so transparent is Durrant Surinat, palimpsest-wise,
and so effortlessly identical with the voice of the implied
author (who may have no logical existence beyond the text
cf Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction*, but who is still the
only Brian W. Aldiss most readers will ever perceive), that
one often quite forgets the jolly amputee for chapters on end
of his claimed narration, and may be forgiven the suspicion
that the implied author – 'Aldiss' if not Aldiss *pur* – had
done likewise.

Durrant Surinat, therefore, comes less as a guise of the
author than as a scrim for same, through which a terrifying
cachination urps, but more of that in a moment.

Right now it's the last lap of Julliann of the Sharkskin's
multiverse hegira, and here he is in sight of his castle, Slo
Surinat, when (lo!) yet another danger confronts him, t
grey fogbank which one of his dire companions identifies
(before the others charge into it) as 'the Dread Brain Mist'
a locution whose hectoring jocosity urps forth (to re-locut
an insulting verb) elsewhere in the book, too, like a voice
print, and whose manic abruption into the multiverse
parody augurs that closing-in of the 'real world' I've already
described, praising it.

About here Durrant, who is little more than precisely

voiceprint, takes over to tell us that the Mist is 'an evil phantom that had haunted man ever since the first men set foot on any version of Earth, Early, Middle, Late or Overdue', and the peculiar awfulness of this quote deserves some comment. Note first the semantic shift from 'man' to 'men' *within* a syntactic moment, a shift from phypostasis to actual figures in the mind's eye, however vaguely seen, which results in a fine example of misplaced concreteness – although 'man' may inhabit a version of Earth without straining the overriding diction of this quote, when 'the first men set *foot*' on a *version* of Earth, the reader tends to suffer from that heat-haze of the syntax immemorially generative of Stuffed Owls or, when unfunny, vertigo. Note also that the dissonant near-repetition of 'man' in 'men' offends the ear, too. And note the general turkey-like gobble of clunk-eared syllables from 'phan' in 'phantom' to 'ver' in 'version', like a goods train braking down a sharp grade, dum-uh-de-dum. Note, finally, the appalling punchline on 'Overdue,' after reading which one's ribs ache from the finger; it's the sort of joke possibly worth a stray guffaw if delivered ad lib to fans at a convention, but which is only distressful in print, though at the same time it does offer some illumination (of which more in a moment) on the problem (a problem shared by enclave literatures and Elks) of how the implied author relates to his readership.

But to continue.

The Dread Brain Mist turns out to be 'a desolating and supine thing' which goes 'under many names such as estrangement, infirmity, melancholy, indecision . . .' plus twenty-eight further substantives to the effect that 'ALL IS NOT WELL!' Caught in this trap, Julliann loses sight of his companions and his horse dies, going 'to join its equine ancestors in the Celestial Stables'. (Joke.) Trapped in the tacky labyrinth, Julliann is soon completely disoriented:

> Only then did he realise that the Dread Brain Mist had formed about him in a gigantic analogue of his own mind. Now he understood why Gururn and Harry had disappeared – by now, they also would be enveloped and swallowed by their own brains. When understanding came to him, faded frescoes appeared on the walls, their colours often muted, their meanings often lost; only occasionally did a scene stand out as

brightly as once it had done. Here was his whole life, scene by scene, and he passed each scene cursing. Each was disappointing, the figures in it shrunken and misshapen, the incidents ridiculous, the protagonists ill-briefed for their roles – and the roles in any case minor and fragmentary, things that had to be hurried through, unrehearsed, and generally with nobody watching.

Making an element of a book physically analogous to its protagonist's mind can pay off both as an esamplasy releaser (within the text we perceive) and as a ground for paraphrasis (short of allegory) in a novel like Par Lagerkvist's tightly through-composed *Barabbas* (1950), where the device as such may well have taken on the 'detachable' form that Michael Moorcock slightly overspecified in *The Final Programme* (1965); in the hands of the implied Aldiss's cursory Durrant, however, this device pays off only as paraphrastic of the question whose utterance exhausts it, to wit: *Whose mind*?

Who is Durrant's voice?

From what rhetorical matrix does that melancholy hee-haw tickle our ribs?

If the implied author's 'mind' is nothing more or less than precisely the book that embodies it, have we then been witness to a *confession*?

Who's the priest?

Immediately after the quote we've taken, Aldiss repeats verbatim (hee hee, guys) the list of thirty-odd substantives descriptive of the Dread Brain Mist (he calls them 'wry intimations of' Julliann's 'human state'); then Julliann, deeply depressed, intones a poem ('Our lives are stews of legend, evermore, / Re-heated and re-served by patterned lore') rather less Pynchonesque than most of the others Aldiss inserts throughout the book (apparently as a play on space 'opera'), but as patent a foregrounding device as any of them, underlining once more the central problem of this text: the decipherment of voice, which of course involves *placing* it.

Julliann's depression worsens at this point:

His sword dropped from his strong right hand, so full of misery was he, tramping blindly through corridors

he had already trod, never knowing what was round the next corner.

Nor is that all; the sense that the corridors Julliann treads are analogous to the reader's course through the novel (most of whose plot we have not yet tried to describe) by no means loses force on the next page when the voice of the book claims (or confesses to) an analogy between Julliann and the author himself, for author and text are homologous:

> Cowardly, wretched, unarmed – however low the state to which his present misfortune had reduced him, Julliann continued against all discouragement, much like an author nearing the end of a chronicle he believes nobody will peruse, yet bent on having one last jest at the expense of non-existent readers.

. . . Which adds to the question *Whose mind*? the equally important Siamese rider, *What readers*? – because I don't for a moment believe that Mr Aldiss really thinks he's not going to have them. On the contrary. Throughout this shambles of a book (synopsis follows), the voice of the implied Aldiss addresses itself conformally to a clear model of readership – a readership guaranteed to absorb *The Eighty-Minute Hour* at some level or other. It will come as no surprise at this point to identify that model of readership as a composition of fans, and to identify the matrix, within which the voice of the book's telling takes shape, as a rhetoric of connivance (or Alamo Bee), binding implied author to implied fan.

OK.

At an sf convention, the relation between author and fan may arguably resemble jazz and storytelling, two familiar stagings of communication as interactive process which do in fact resemble each other, though neither much resembles a *book*. . . . Like convention highs, both are sessions. In jazz there is (or can be) a working rhetoric of communion between the claimed spontaneity or presentness-to-input of the performer, and the nature of the audience, comprised as it is of those 'fatefully' seen to be present; both interact to shape the session, nor can that session either be repeated or paraphrased: hence our intuitive sense that it is something holy (man). In oral storytelling, the same 'fateful' presentness

of ground to focus (focus to ground) bears a semantic burden as well, for the teller of the tale lays on vicarious geasa whose outcomes are responded to as being perceivably related to that community or ground the audience comprises. The teller is the voice we know; his formulaic web prefigures genre topoi, which may explain some of the confusion of rhetorical voice in modern sf (and Delany's Mouse). The storyteller's pauses and melismas and hints and cocoricos mediate any awkward caesuras, improbabilities, slack portions of narrative or genealogy, digressions from the shape of the ground that lends an ear; sanctioning the tale by the tone of its telling, he keeps fate in trim: seen but not paraphrasable; always under the sign of the session, where the teller is not defined as priest (putting out all over the sacred ground) but as known voice relating.

And so an author en famille at the Alamo. . . .

But to try to shift this rhetoric of communion into the matrix of a book's voice (as in *The Eighty-Minute Hour*, for instance, or in *Nova*) simply and fundamentally can't be done, for a book is not a session, nor does its implied author genuinely communicate with hypostasised fans because he (the shape of the implied Aldiss) precisely is the text itself (as we've already claimed), all else being ventriloquism. Having dreamed the incompossible fan, the implied Aldiss (like Theodore Sturgeon and Robert A. Heinlein and Samuel R. Delany) must take responsibility for any gaffes engendered by that false relation; authorship as an oration to fans confuses composition with performance, and creates that rhetoric of connivance with which the reader (a real fan say) may well be complicit, because it seems flattering, but which ultimately grates the teeth. Nor are the perspectives of time (as in the weekend essays of Maurice Hewlett, to really lay it on) very kind to the pathos of connivance-claims.

The implied Aldiss must take responsibility for all the noise and all the gaffes of the book under review, for all the hectoring and nudge-nudge-wink-winking and drawn-out punning ('A big woolly lamb trundled by. It too was smiling. Sheepishly.'); for the Thorne Smith filibustering ('There was a glacier parked in the car park. More than parked, in fact. It covered most of the park . . .' and so on and so on) so narcotic, so time-killing, so reminiscent of the 1960s Murray Leinster as well as of the author of *Topper*; for tone-deaf grammar ('. . . to bear con-

vincingly tidings . . .') and for grammar simply wrong ('A slight comedy goes among the other two most noted guests . . .'); for flyblown ('Half his cranium and the top of his face had been sliced off – not wisely, maybe, but too well.') gusto; for lumbering oxymorons ('Their presence filled the absent rooms.') and goosed figures of speech – get it? – ('. . . a herring of deepest redness . . .') and shambling personifications ('. . . Nature, ever sly to make a comeback . . .'), all of which an oral storyteller or speechifier might possibly get away with through his manipulative sussing of the encounter (his stagecraft), but which a book can't; finally, in the solitude of its true nature, this book's voice, this 'Brian W. Aldiss', must take responsibility for that distressing pathos we've already adduced, that indecorous confusion between communion and ventriloquism, so that *The Eighty-Minute Hour* tells itself as an onomatopoeia of selfhood, an elbowing doubtletake of the author to the effect: Well I guess *that's* the sound I make, right guys?: but without admitting it, except in a moment of melancholia output whose confession I don't find to bear convincingly tidings, frankly.

At some level any book's plot and characters are only superfetations of its voice, onomatopoeia, and Mr Aldiss *pur* may well have intended to hang his spoofing of space opera conventions onto a travesty of the Session Fallacy so common to science fiction as a whole; but to follow that line of thought begs the question of what the book itself says and does to one, and succumbs to another Fallacy – the Intentional. No. *The Eighty-Minute Hour* fails precisely because its plot and characters, however intended under a claim of derisive spoofing, are superfetations of the wrong voice.

There is a story.

After a devastating war, Earth's surviving nations have grouped themselves into two opposing blocs, the larger of which Attica Saigon Smix dominates; but where is Attica Saigon Smix? Projections of this gentleman walk the earth and chair conferences, but the real Attica Saigon Smix has used his scientists' discoveries to create a hideaway for himself deep within an alternate phase of reality, an 'ecopicosystem' whose matrix rests within a pendant he has given to Monty Zoomer, but Monty Zoomer has ignorantly passed it on, causing a lot of toing and froing, most of which is inexplicable at first as the *role of the pendant* only achieves

the muddy focus it eventually attains late late in the book, deeper than plummet sounds. The other bloc of nations features the gormless Surinat clan, which includes the legless dreamer and the legless I-narrator, who is transparent to the self-preening voice. Between the two factions, and insidiously coming to control both, we find the computer complex, whose own Dickian projection, Thunderbird Smith, both shouts a lot and elicits some effective imagery, here and there. Conspiring to an autotelic dominance of mankind (as in all genre vulgarisations of Ellul and Mumford and the rest, conspiracy must be adduced) the Computer Complex (to render caps unto Caesar) devises the eighty-minute hour, apparently as a morale breaker, and is eagerly on the look-out for Attica Saigon Smix's hideaway, so as to control him too, and on this, and on the pendant, and on the intrusion of certain time-turbulences, the plot turns.

The turbulences whisk various protagonists off to the deep past or future, causing the Computer Complex to chase the pendant containing Smix billions of years backwards through time, eventually to land for a confrontation scene on the old fifth planet, which soon explodes, making the asteroid belt. But an element of the Complex survives in possession of the pendant, which it deposits on Mars to be discovered, much much later, by the evil Dr Chaplain whose eros control device (modelled on the hypothalamus) turns out to have been itself used by the Computer Complex in the deep past as a model for the hypothalamus in its (the Computer Complex's) engineering of the homeostatic phyla, making homo sapiens possible. Before the noval begins, Chaplain has sold the pendant to Attica Saigon Smix. . . .

. . . But what the hell's the use? So what there's a plot, a sort of contortuplication high that even the scantiest synopsis almost rescues by revoicing it? So what characters abound? By naming them, synopsis gives them a more abundant life, if only potentially, than ever the voice of *The Eighty-Minute Hour* would dream of permitting in its shape. To rescue plot or characters from that benumbing pazzazz falls into one of the traps it sets for the reader – that of believing anything in the book except the sound of its telling. Terminally the implied author utters through his ghostly puppets a buffo vaudeville – 'Think! Take us with you wherever you wend, / Else our Hour of Existence is now at an end, / So think, think, think, again!' – and sud-

denly there came over me a vision of the dear Mr Barrie bullying helpless children from his guise of Tinkerbell. And suddenly I knew the shape of my animus against the implied Mr Aldiss of this book. Even as a child I always longed to stomp Tinkerbell.

COMING TO LIFE

M. JOHN HARRISON

At a constant temperature, the volume of a given quantity of any gas is inversely proportional to the pressure upon the gas. This – which any science fiction reader will at once recognise as Boyle's Law – is a fairly neat, fairly simple transaction. It is, in a sense, the 'irreducible' statement sought by absolutists; it may require a perfectly elastic gas, but it never requires sympathy. You can depend on Boyle's Law, predict with it, work it from both ends and it still comes out right – and these qualities give it a charming directness, an attractive cleanliness not possessed by the following, which is less than equivocal and a shade too close for comfort to those mysterious ungoverned messes we keep getting ourselves into by virtue of being human; something which might only be a truth for a second, or never, in two or three different ways or in no way at all:

The boy stood crying beside a public fountain, a water faucet projecting from a crude block of concrete, at the intersection of two narrow streets. Five years old, perhaps six. He was carrying a large plastic bucket of water in each hand, one bright red, the other turquoise. The water had splashed over his thin trousers and bare feet.

At first he supposed he cried only because of the cold. The damp ground must be near to freezing. To walk on it in bare wet feet. . . .

Then he saw the slippers. They were what he would have called shower slippers, small, die-stamped ovals

of blue plastic with a single thong that had to be grasped between the first and second toe.

The boy would stoop over and force the thongs between his stiff, cold-reddened toes, but after only a step or two the slippers would again fall off his numb feet. With each frustrated progress more water would slop over the sides of the buckets. He could not keep the slippers on his feet and he would not walk off without them.

With this understanding came a kind of horror, a horror of his own helplessness. He could not go up to the boy and ask him where he lived, lift him and carry him – he was so small – to his home. Nor could he scold the child's parents for having sent him out on this errand without proper shoes or winter clothes. He could not even take up the buckets and have the child lead him to his home. For each of these possibilities demanded that he be able to *speak* to the boy, and this he could not do.

Nothing is solved. Isn't that frustrating? Not to worry: for forty years now, science fiction writers have been working ceaselessly on behalf of those of us who are embarrassed or confused, upset or merely bored by such things – carefully-shaven, boyish theoretical chemists in search of the one manipulation which will render that messy transaction of human business as neat as their own clothes, as clear as their own blue eyes, and as irreducible as Boyle's Law.

Vast strides have been made. There is for instance a sediment in the skulls of small boys which makes them cry when they have icy feet – sf writers (working carefully in teams) have scraped it out, and *their* small boys go in electrically heated sneakers; there is something dreadfully frustrating about being alive enough to apprehend such instances as significant – sf writers have smoothed that irritation away with a wonderful balm, and *their* concerns are planetary, general, abiding. Everything is easy, and, in the end, invisible; models of human exchange or experience become progressively more streamlined and vestigial as the Great Research bears its fruit and the genre manufactures formula after magical formula: so that when the characters of science fiction do, by some tragic accident, get themselves into a human situation, they can be seen to solve it.

The solution is all. Thus we find 'Karen' (I use the quote marks because there exists no personal Karen, only a manageable quantity represented by the term, to be noted in appropriate terminology and shuffled through the balletic phrases and contractions of Boyle's Law) of Robert Heinlein's *Farnham's Freehold*, tabulating, quantifying and *solving* the complex cluster of emotional and physiological and quintessentially human terrors of childbirth with this simple statement:

'. . . Sorry about the sound-effects, Daddy.'

Daddy knows what she means. We all know what she means. The pain has become easily definable, easily diagnosed: reduced. We may now pass it over, as we may pass over Mrs Farnham's 'alcoholism', which is even more offensively simplified, or Duke Farnham's 'Oedipus Complex' (although we might out of simple curiosity enquire while passing just why this latter is used as a pejorative when Karen Farnham's equally obvious, but perhaps less intentional, 'Electra Complex' – she even offers herself to Daddy at one point – is never mentioned).

There are plenty of reasons why this process of simplification should be necessary, indeed vital. Science fiction readers do not care to be bothered by the sort of complication represented by the boy at the faucet (their concerns lie elsewhere, they tell us, repeatedly, from the depths of their bemused self-concern and the blurry pages of their home-made journals); science fiction publishers, poor souls, have understood this – and besides are haunted by funny blue ectoplasmic ladies from the libraries of the American Mid-West, shaking an accusatory spectral finger at anything that might imply believable joy or agony; science fiction writers – well, they've made a virtue out of necessity long since – for decades the genre has selected for illiteracy as well as inhumanity, and now its exponents can't seem to do anything else.

But look: 'Karen' and 'Daddy' are already fading! The clean-cut science majors down the corridor have as yet developed no fixative! Even the wise, self-taught professor from MIT can find no answer! They never had much substance to lose, anyway – the Law itself endures, but perfect gases are susceptible. I only mention them because they are in a way sad, the jerky extremes of a determined old cripple

on a tennis court whose volume will always defeat him.

By the very act of obeying the Law, 'Karen' and 'Daddy' go down into entropy, whereas somehow that little Turkish boy from Thomas M. Disch's *The Asian Shore* does not – he is *still* at that bloody faucet, eternally trying to reconcile one enormous painful aspect of the world with another, eternally captured, as are all imperfectly elastic human beings, by his circumstances. This enmeshment is central to Disch's work. It resides in every metaphor, and makes the overt fantasy or whimsy seem an almost accidental by-product; as if each event, struck lightly once or twice against its own significance or essence, has been excited into throwing off some spark at once visible and invisible, entertaining but also truthful.

This can be seen most clearly – possibly because of the compressed nature of the form – in his short stories, a new collection of which, called *Getting Into Death*, was issued recently by Hart-Davis McGibbon.

As with the protagonist of *The Asian Shore*, haunted by a whole continent, stalked, possessed and finally assimilated (or was he ever anything else, was the visiting American architect he supposed himself to be nothing, in the end, but a ghost?) as the Turkish husband of a Turkish family, so with the lonely woman of *The Persistence of Desire*, with her disconnected telephone and empathetic visions of a dying turtle trapped in an aquarium where the rocks are all dry and polished, the sides sheer and plastic, and the water has become repellent, untenable. So also with the ingenuous couple lost in the infinite pastoral cemetry of *Let Us Quickly Hasten to the Gate of Ivory*, and the no less ingenuous students, writers and painters of the blatantly autobiographical *Slaves* and *The Master of the Milford Altarpiece*: at the heart of each story sits the beautiful and economical depiction of people struggling constantly for or against not simply a 'fit' with but an understanding of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Thus Cassandra Millar, in the title-piece, a successful writer of Gothic romances dying of valve stenosis in her hospital room, and wondering just how she stands with death – trying to interpret it in terms of her own humorous, kind-hearted egocentrism. She is surrounded by the well-meaning: they lie to her, and she sees through them with due sympathy; they pander and fumble about in that miserable gauche way human beings have when confronted

with the doomed; and suddenly she comes to realise that this is what she needs, through them she understands finally that death is as much a medium of human exchange as life. But look at this first image:

> Like another Madame Defarge fat Robin sat there knitting a sweater for her dying mother, who, from her $200-a-day bed, regarded the pudgy, industrious fingers with a complacent irony. Just so (Cassandra fancied) might an aristocrat, at the height of the Terror, have looked down from his tumbril, then leant across to the pretty duchess accompanying him to the place of their execution to whisper some pleasantry. But the duchess, distraught, could no more have caught his drift than poor dear Robin could catch hers.

The duchess *knows*. The image is full of mirrors. Even Robin is not what she seems.

It isn't all puzzlement and death (whoever said it should be?), but it *is* all steel-tipped; because Disch is too rigorous for his sense of humour to be anything but the same. Much is concerned with self-delusion, much is satirical, much – for he is the absolute prose technician, economical, quick as a snake – depends on an observation of technique as acute as his observation of humanity. He's a dazzler and a magician, moving from the baroque-antique of *The Planet Arcadia*, through the correspondence-column outrage of *The Invasion of the Giant Stupid Dinosaurs*, to the pot-pourri of *The Complete Short Stories* with an altogether deceptive ease; and he handles the lampoon of *Feathers From the Wings of an Angel* with a sort of wide-eyed innocent surprise at his own ability to juggle that brings salt to the eyes:

> . . . the vast sea of public opinion must be foam-tipped, as well as underlain by ooze and decaying matter, but the mighty depths are crystalline, pure, and unvexed. The judges of the contest have not awarded the prize to you according to arbitrary standards of 'literary taste' and deceiving brilliance, but because your true-life story seeks out the latent, earnest emotions of myriads of readers of *Life* magazine. Your story has heart-value, and heart-value is in the end the supreme test by which men and art must fail or become immortal.

And you're never quite sure on how many levels you're being teased.

Elsewhere, though (and Disch being what he is we have to come back to it again and again), there's a kind of wondering distance put between writer and fiction by the prose, a distance which allows affection without sentimentality, sympathy without blindness, truth without bitterness; and it's death on the maudlin. The aerobatics of *Camp Concentration*, astonishing enough, have been transcended, put aside with quiet confidence: he was streets ahead of any other science fiction writer then – now he doesn't belong to our comfy, stinky little ghetto at all. You can't achieve this sort of calm proficiency without needing it, and science fiction simply does not make enough demands on its executants; the crude, the on-off reaction satisfies.

The things that are done by Thomas M. Disch's characters are real things: the things that are done *to* Robert Heinlein's characters by Robert Heinlein are always done in the name of something. A private social system, a primitive ideology; it doesn't really matter – just that when they aren't mere cannon fodder, they're intended to be 'living proof' of something or other: a destiny which bestows on them all the humanity of the shop-window mannequin, whose stiff and accentless poses are also intended to demonstrate. Science fiction allows him to construct landscapes and situations in which his dupes have no choice but to act out roles he has given them, no choice but to tread the measures of the Law. Back then, to *Farnham's Freehold* (or God's Little Acre), where in the patient, killingly reasonable tones of the psychotic, Hubert Farnham addresses his son:

> '. . . until you decide to make a bid for leadership, I expect the same willing discipline you showed under parole.'
>
> '"Willing discipline" indeed!'
>
> 'In the long run there is no other sort. I can't quell a mutiny every few hours – and I've had two from you plus an utter lack of discipline from your mother. No leader can function on those terms . . .
>
> '. . . Unless you make up your mind to that, your safest course is to shoot me in the back.'

After the disaster, breathing an atmosphere of the most

sublimely elastic gases, a man is allowed (indeed bound) to do what he always knew he must. The lambent $V \propto \frac{1}{p}$ holds infinite simplification, infinite forgiveness, infinite promise. **The solution is all.**

At times there can be sensed at the hub of the genre something so repellent, so intolerably fixated and vacuous that you don't know quite whether to choke or laugh.

OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED

The Wind from Nowhere, *The Terminal Beach*, *The Drowned World*, *The Drought*, by J. G. Ballard, Penguin, 30p each. *Concrete Island* by J. G. Ballard, Cape, £1.95p.

Penguin have re-issued, at long last, J. G. Ballard's first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere*, his best short-story collection, *The Terminal Beach*, what many believe his best novel, *The Drowned World* and its 'spiritual sequel', *The Drought*. The first suffers from weakness of construction, but has some excellent moments and fine (if now familiar) Ballard imagery. All highly recommended, as is *Concrete Island* (or the Return of Maitland, hero of *Wind*) about a man suffering from a sense of isolation who gets stranded on a road island on a motorway extension, meets people, thinks, talks and finds himself spare, satisfying Ballard, lacking the somewhat hysterical tone of what are so far his masterpieces, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *Crash*. All good stuff.

WEB

The Sword and the Stallion by Michael Moorcock, Allison and Busby, £2.50. *The Land Leviathan* by Michael Moorcock, Quartet Books, £2.50 hardback, £1.25 'midway'.

A fantasy (monsters 'n' mysticism) and a scientific romance (return of Captain Bastable of *The Warlord of the Air*), displaying this prolific author's range if not his depth. For my money *The English Assassin* is worth all the rest rolled into one, and then some. But if you like this sort of thing . . .

WEB

THE AUTHORS

M. JOHN HARRISON has contributed regularly to NEW WORLDS since 1968. His latest novel *The Centauri Device* will shortly be published in the U.K. and U.S.A. and has been received with considerable enthusiasm by his publishers. A collection of his short stories is to be published by Panther in the near future.

BARRY BAYLEY's latest novel *The Soul of A Robot* was recently published in the U.K. by Allison and Busby and will be published by Doubleday in the U.S. He has been writing sf for many years and has appeared in most of the British sf magazines since the fifties.

PETER JOBLING was born in North Shields in 1933. He did his National Service in the RAF, studied at the College of Art, Newcastle on Tyne, is a BA (Fine Art), taught art in Leicestershire, South Yorkshire and is now head of Arts and Crafts at Hull Senior Comprehensive. His poetry has been published in BREAKTHRU INTERNATIONAL and he has written two books, *History of Sculpture* and *Modelling in Clay*. He frequently exhibits his paintings and sculptures, is married, with four children. *Building Blocks* is his first published fiction.

ROBERT MEADLEY was born in Yorkshire, 1947. His first appearance in NWQ was with *Among Other Things* (No. 6). Describes himself as 'a master Packer but not yet a Blacksmith'.

JOHN CLUTE's first novel *The Disinheriting Party* was published recently by Allison and Busby. He has been a resident critic with NW for some years and also reviews regularly

for THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION in the U.S.

MICHAEL MOORCOCK was editor of NEW WORLDS between 1964 and 1973. He has published many novels, the majority of them being sf or fantasy, writes for and performs with the rock band Hawkwind and has recently begun to make records with his own band. *White Stars* is the second novella in a series which began with *Pale Roses* in the previous number of NWQ. It is part of a sequence chiefly represented by the novel trilogy *The Dancers at the End of Time*.

LIBBY HOUSTON has a well-deserved reputation as one of the best modern English poets. Her work has been published in two collections, *A Stained Glass Raree Show* and *Plain Clothes* (Allison and Busby) both illustrated by her husband, Mal Dean. Some of her poems appeared in NEW WORLDS in 1968. Born in London, educated at Oxford University, she has two children, Sam and Alice.

NIGEL FRANCIS was born in 1949 and since 1968 has worked on NEW WORLDS as Art Editor and Bicycle Mechanic. The stories published here are his first to appear.

HILARY BAILEY, the editor of NWQ, was born in 1936 and educated at ten schools and Cambridge University. She has published many stories in sf magazines, including NEW WORLDS, and has just completed her first two novels. Her collaborations with Michael Moorcock include three children and one novel, *The Black Corridor*.

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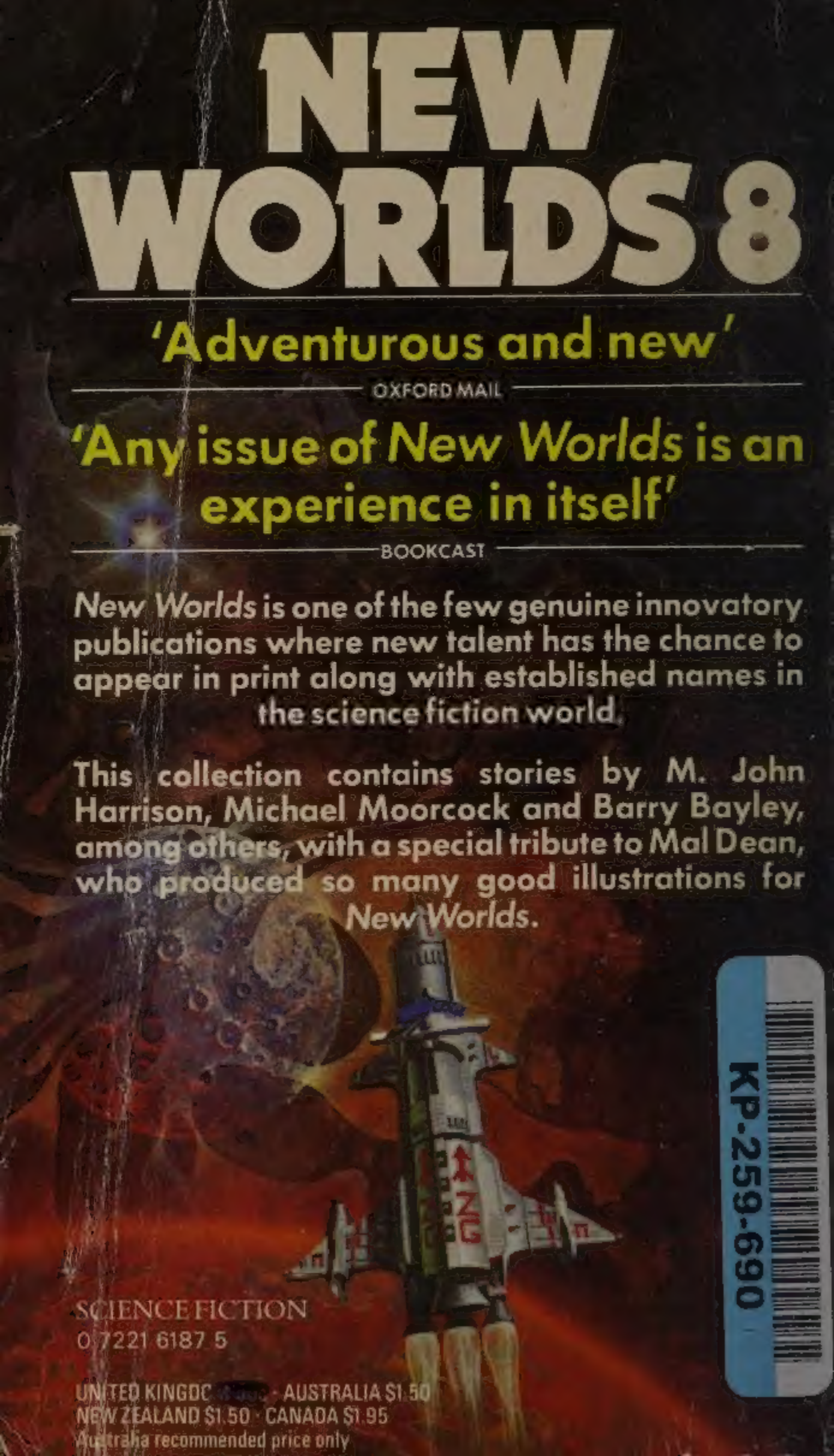

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